# Farrell’s Caddie

# John Updike

When Farrell signed up, with seven other aging members of his local Long Island club, for a week of golf at the Royal Caledonian Links in Scotland, he didn’t foresee the relationship with the caddies. Hunched little men in billed tweed caps and rubberized rain suits, they huddled in the misty gloom as the morning foursomes got organized, and reclustered after lunch, muttering as unintelligibly as sparrows, for the day’s second eighteen.

Farrell would never have walked thirty-six holes a day in America, but here in Scotland golf was not an accessory to life, drawing upon one’s marginal energy; it *was* life, played out of the center of one’s being. At first, stepping forth on legs one of which had been broken in a college football game forty years before, and which damp weather or a night of twisted sleep still provoked to a reminiscent twinge, he missed the silky glide and swerve of the accustomed electric cart, its magic-carpet suspension above the whispering fairway; he missed the rattle of spare balls in the retaining shelf, and the round plastic holes to hold drinks, alcoholic or carbonated, and the friendly presence on the seat beside him of another gray-haired sportsman, another warty pickle blanching in the brine of time, exuding forbearance and the expectation of forbearance, and resigned, like Farrell, to a golfing mediocrity that would make its way down the sloping dogleg of decrepitude to the level green of death.

Here, however, on the heather-rimmed fairways, cut as close as putting surfaces back home, yet with no trace of mower tracks, and cheerfully marred by the scratchings and burrows of the nocturnal rabbits that lived and bred beneath the impenetrably thorny, waist-high gorse, energy came up through the turf, as if Farrell’s cleats were making contact with primal spirits beneath the soil, and he felt he could walk forever. The rolling treeless terrain, the proximity of the wind-whipped sea, the rain that came and went with the suddenness of thought—they composed the ancient matrix of the game, and the darkly muttering caddies were also part of this matrix.

That first morning in the drizzly shuffle around the golf bags, his bag was hoisted up by a hunched shadow who, as they walked together in pursuit of Farrell’s first drive (good contact, but pulled to the left, toward some shaggy mounds), muttered half to himself, with those hiccups or glottal stops the Scots accent inserts, “Sandy’s wha’ th’ call me.”

Farrell hesitated, then confessed, “I’m Gus.” His given name, Augustus, had always embarrassed him, but its shortened version seemed a little short on dignity, and at the office, as he had ascended in rank, his colleagues had settled on his initials, “A. J.”

“Ye want now tae geh oover th’ second boosh fra’ th’ laift,” Sandy said, handing Farrell a 7-iron. The green was out of sight behind the shaggy mounds, which were covered with a long tan grass that whitened in waves as gusts beat in from the sea.

“What’s the distance?” Farrell was accustomed to yardage markers—yellow stakes, or sprinkler heads.

The caddie looked reflectively at a sand bunker not far off, and then at the winking red signal light on the train tracks beyond, and finally at a large bird, a gull or a crow, winging against the wind beneath the low, tattered, blue-black clouds. “Ah hunnert thirhty-eight tae th’ edge o’ th’ green, near a hunnert fifty tae th’ pin, where they ha’ ’t.”

“I can’t hit a seven-iron a hundred fifty. I can’t hit it even one forty, against this wind.”

Yet the caddie’s fist, in a fingerless wool glove, did not withdraw the offered club. “Siven’s what ye need.”

As Farrell bent his face to the ball, the wet wind cut across his eyes and made him cry. His tears turned one ball into two; he supposed the brighter one was real. He concentrated on taking the clubhead away slowly and low to the turf, initiating his downswing with a twitch of the left hip, and suppressing his tendency to dip the right shoulder. The shot seemed sweet, soaring with a gentle draw precisely over the second bush. He looked toward the caddie, expecting congratulations or at least some small sign of shared pleasure. But the man, whose creased face was weathered the strangely even brown of a white actor playing Othello, followed the flight of the ball as he had that of the crow, reflectively. “Yer right hand’s a wee bit froward,” he observed, and the ball, they saw as they climbed to the green, was indeed pulled to the left, into a deep pot bunker. Furthermore, it was fifteen yards short. The caddie had underclubbed him, but showed no sign of remorse as he handed Farrell the sand wedge. In Sandy’s dyed-looking face, pallid gray eyes showed like touches of morning light; it shocked Farrell to suspect that the other man, weathered though he was, and bent beneath the weight of a perpetual golf bag, was younger than himself—a prematurely wizened Pict, a concentrate of Farrell’s diluted, Yankeefied Celtic blood.

The side of the bunker toward the hole was as tall as Farrell and sheer, built up of bricks of sod in a way he had never seen before, not even at Shinnecock Hills. Rattled, irritated at having been unrepentantly underclubbed, Farrell swung five times into the damp, brown sand, darker and denser than any sand on Long Island; each time, the ball thudded short of the trap’s lip and dribbled back at his feet. “ ’it at it well beheend,” the caddie advised, “and dinna stop th’ cloob.” Farrell’s sixth swing brought the ball bobbling up onto the green, within six feet of the hole.

His fellow Americans lavished ironical praise on the tardily excellent shot but the caddie, with the same deadpan solemnity with which Farrell had repeatedly struck the ball, handed him his putter. “Ae ball tae th’ laift,” he advised, and Farrell was so interested in this quaint concept—the ball as a unit of measure—that his putt stopped short. “Ye forgot tae ’it it, Goos,” Sandy told him.

Farrell tersely nodded. The caddie made him feel obliged to keep up a show of golfing virtues. Asked for his score, he said loudly, in a stagey voice, “That was an honest ten.”

“We’ll call it a six,” said the player keeping score, in the forgiving, corrupting American way.

As the round progressed, through a rapid alternation of brisk showers and silvery sunshine, with rainbows springing up around them and tiny white daisies gleaming underfoot, Farrell and his caddie began to grow into one another, as a foot in damp weather grows into a shoe. Sandy consistently handed Farrell one club too short to make the green, but Farrell came to accept the failure as his own; his caddie was handing the club to the stronger golfer latent in Farrell, and it was Farrell’s job to let this superior performer out, to release him from his stiff, soft, more than middle-aged body. On the twelfth hole, called “Dunrobin”—a seemingly endless par-five with a broad stretch of fairway, bleak and vaguely restless like the surface of the moon, receding over a distant edge marked by two small pot bunkers, with a pale-green arm of gorse extending from the rabbit-undermined thickets on the left—his drive clicked. Something about the ghostly emptiness of this terrain, the featurelessness of it, had removed Farrell’s physical inhibitions; he felt the steel shaft of the driver bend in a subtle curve at his back, and a corresponding springiness awaken in his knees, and he knew, as his weight elastically moved from the right foot to the left, that he would bring the clubface squarely into the ball, and indeed did, so that the ball—the last of his Titleists, the others having already been swallowed by gorse and heather and cliffside scree—was melting deep into the drizzle straight ahead almost before he looked up, with his head still held sideways as if pillowed on his right ear, just like the pros on television. He cocked an eye at Sandy. “O.K.?” asked Farrell, mock-modest but also genuinely fearful of some hazard, some trick of the layout, that he had missed taking into account.

“Gowf shot, sirr,” the caddie said, and his face, as if touched by a magic wand, crumpled into a smile full of crooked gray teeth, his constantly relit cigarette adhering to one corner. Small matter that Farrell, striving for a repetition of his elastic sensations, topped the following 3-wood, hit a 5-iron fat and short, and skulled his wedge shot clear across the elevated green. He had for a second awakened the golf giant sleeping among his muscles, and imagined himself now cutting a more significant figure in the other man’s not quite colorless, not quite indifferent eyes.

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Dinner, for this week of foreign excursion, was a repeating male event, involving the same eight Long Island males, their hair growing curly and their faces ruddy away from the arid Manhattan canyons and air-conditioned offices where they had accumulated their small fortunes. They discussed their caddies as men, extremely unbuttoned, might discuss their mistresses. What does a caddie want? “Come on, Freddie, *’it* it fer once!” the very distinguished banker Frederic M. Panoply boasted that his had cried out to him as, on the third day of displaying his cautious, successful, down-the-middle game, he painstakingly addressed his ball.

Another man’s caddie, when asked what he thought of Mrs. Thatcher, had responded with a twinkle, “She’d be a good ’ump.”

Farrell, prim and reserved by nature, though not devoid of passion, had relatively little to offer concerning Sandy. He worried that the man’s incessant smoking would kill him. He wondered if the tips he gave him were too far below what a Japanese golfer would have bestowed. He feared that Sandy was becoming tired of him. As the week went by, their relationship had become more intuitive. “A six-iron?” Farrell would now say, and without word would be handed the club. Once he had dared decline an offered 6, asked for the 5, and sailed his unusually well-struck shot into the sedge beyond the green. On the greens, where he at first had been bothered by the caddie’s explicit directives, so that he forgot to stroke the ball firmly, Farrell had come to depend upon Sandy’s advice, and would expertly cock his ear close to the caddie’s mouth, and try to envision the curve of the ball into the center of the hole from “an inch an’ a fhingernail tae th’ laift.” He began to sink putts. He began to get pars, as the whitecaps flashed on one side of the links and on the other the wine-red electric commuter trains swiftly glided up to Glasgow and back. This was happiness, bracketed between sea and rail, and freedom, of a wild and windy sort. On the morning of his last day, having sliced his first drive into the edge of the rough, between a thistle and what appeared to be a child’s weathered tombstone, Farrell bent his ear close to the caddie’s mouth for advice, and heard, “Ye’d be better leavin’ ’er.”

“Beg pardon?” Farrell said, as he had all week, when the glottal, hiccupping accent had become opaque. Today the acoustics were especially bad; a near-gale off the sea made his rain pants rattle like machine guns and deformed his eyeballs with air pressure as he tried to squint down. When he could stop seeing double, his lie looked fair—semi-embedded. The name on the tombstone was worn away. Perhaps it was merely an ancient railroad right-of-way marker.

“Yer missus,” Sandy clarified, passing over the 8-iron. “Ere it’s tae late, mon. She was never yer type. Tae proper.”

“Shouldn’t this be a wedge?” Farrell asked uncertainly.

“Nay, it’s sittin’ up guid enough,” the caddie said, pressing his foot into the heather behind the ball so it rose up like ooze out of mud. “Ye kin reach with th’ eight,” he said. “Go fer yer par, mon. Yer fauts er a’ in yer mind; ye tend t’ play a hair defainsive.”

Farrell would have dismissed Sandy’s previous remarks, as a verbal mirage amid the clicks and skips of wind-blown Scots, had they not seemed so uncannily true. “Too proper” was exactly what his college friends had said of Sylvia, but he had imagined that her physical beauty had been the significant thing, and her propriety a pose she would outgrow, whereas thirty-five married years had revealed the propriety as enduring and the beauty as transient. As to leaving her, this thought would never have entered his head until recently; the mergers-and-acquisitions branch had recently taken on a certain Irma Finegold, who had heavy-lidded eyes, full lips painted vermilion, and a curious presumptuous way of teasing Farrell in the eddies of chitchat before and after conferences, or in the elevator up to the boardroom. She had been recently divorced, and when she talked to Farrell she manipulated her lower lip with a pencil eraser and shimmied her shoulders beneath their pads. On nights when the office worked late—he liked occasionally to demonstrate that, well-along though he was, he could still pull an all-nighter with the young bucks—there had been between him and Irma shared Chinese meals in greasy take-out cartons, and a joint limo home in the dawn light, through the twinned arches and aspiring tracery of the Brooklyn Bridge. And on one undreamed-of occasion, there had been an invitation, which he did not refuse, to delay his return to Long Island with an interlude at her apartment in Park Slope. Though no young buck, he had not done badly, it seemed to him, even factoring in the flattery quotient from a subordinate.

The 8-iron pinched the ball clean, and the Atlantic gale brought the soaring shot left-to-right toward the pin. “Laift edge, but dinna gi’ th’ hole away,” Sandy advised of the putt, and Farrell sank it, for the first birdie of his week of golf.

Now, suddenly, out of the silvery torn sky, sleet and sunshine poured simultaneously. While the two men walked at the same tilt to the next tee, Sandy’s voice came out of the wind, “An’ steer clear o’ th’ MiniCorp deal. They’ve laiver-aged th’ company tae daith.”

Farrell studied Sandy’s face. Rain and sleet bounced off the brown skin as if from a waxy preservative coating. Metallic gleams showed as the man studied, through narrowed eyelids, the watery horizon. Farrell pretended he hadn’t heard. On the tee he was handed a 3-wood, with the advice, “Ye want tae stay short o’ th’ wee burn. Th’ wind’s come around beheend, bringin’ th’ sun with it.”

As the round wore on, the sun did struggle through, and a thick rainbow planted itself over the profile of the drab town beyond the tracks, with its black steeples and distillery chimneys. By the afternoon’s eighteen, there was actually blue sky, and the pockets of lengthening shadow showed the old course to be everywhere curvaceous, crest and swale, like the body of a woman. Forty feet off the green on the fourteenth (“Whinny Brae”), Farrell docilely accepted the caddie’s offer of a putter, and rolled it up and over the close-mown irregularities within a gimme of the hole. His old self would have skulled or fluffed a chip. “Great advice,” he said, and in his flush of triumph challenged the caddie: “But Irma *loves* the MiniCorp deal.”

“Aye, ’t keeps th’ twa o’ ye taegither. She’s fairful ye’ll wander off, i’ th’ halls o’ corporate power.”

“But what does she see in me?”

“Lookin’ fer a father, th’ case may be. Thet first husband o’ hers was meikle immature, an’ also far from yer own income bracket.”

Farrell felt his heart sink at the deflating shrewdness of the analysis. His mind elsewhere, absented by bittersweet sorrow, he hit one pure shot after another. Looking to the caddie for praise, however, he met the same impassive, dour, young-old visage, opaque beneath the billed tweed cap. Tomorrow, he would be caddying for someone else, and Farrell would be belted into a business-class seat within a 747. On the home stretch of holes—one after the other strung out beside the railroad right-of-way, as the Victorian brick clubhouse, with its turrets and neo-Gothic windows, enlarged in size—Farrell begged for the last scraps of advice. “The five-wood, or the three-iron? The three keeps it down out of the wind, but I feel more confident with the wood, the way you’ve got me swinging.”

“Th’ five’ll be ower an’ gone; ye’re a’ poomped up. Take th’ four-iron. Smooth it on, laddie. Aim fer th’ little broch.”

“Broch?”

“Wee stone fortress, frae th’ days we had our own braw king.” He added, “An’ ye might be thinkin’ aboot takin’ early retirement. Th’ severance deals won’t be so sweet aye, with th’ coomin’ resaission. Ye kin free yerself up, an’ take on some consults, fer th’ spare change.”

“Just what I was thinking, if Irma’s a will-o’-the-wisp.”

“Will-o’-the-wisp, d’ ye say? Ye’re a speedy lairner, Goos.”

Farrell felt flattered and wind-scoured, here in this surging universe of green and gray. “You really think so, Sandy?”

“I *ken* sae. Ye kin tell a’ aboot a man, frae th’ way he gowfs.”