

Croquet

ON HENRY'S SIGNAL, Tank catches the bartender squarely between the shoulder blades with the frisbee from a good fifty feet away.

'Sooooorryyy!' Tank yells across the lawn.

When the bartender turns around to toss back the frisbee Henry pours several shots of vodka into his tumbler of lemonade.

'Hey, Slick,' says Finnegan, appearing out of nowhere. 'Whata we got here? Sandwiches, huh?'

At six-foot-two, Finn towers over Henry who is still growing.

'Some kind of croissant and lobster salad, I think,' mumbles Henry. How much did Finn just see?

'I thought you told me last yeeah when we were out on the boat that lobsta salad was disgustin' and had no place in any self-respectin' sandwich.' Finnegan sounds like JFK.

'I might have. Times change, I guess. We all have to grow up, right?'

'Right-O.'

Finn regards Henry as Tank comes panting up.

'Hey, Finn!' Henry may be dubious about Finnegan, but Tank liked him from the moment he met him, with his signature handlebar mustache and yellow-gray ponytail trailing down his back to his belt loops. It doesn't matter that Finn is older than the brother's grandmother, Alice. The twinkle in his sky-blue eyes tells anyone who's paying attention that something about Jimmy Finnegan is younger than most people half his age.

'Hey, Tank! Good to see you. That was a pretty sweet throw.'

So Finn saw the whole charade. Why isn't he saying anything?

Finnegan eyes the two boys, sizing them up.

'Hey, you two wanna have a little fun? Play some croquet?'

'Croquet?' asks Tank.

'Seriously?' asks Henry.

Finn ignores Henry's sarcasm.

'Sure. Why not?'

He nods towards two older couples leaning on heavy-looking croquet mallets, sipping tall cocktails and chatting amiably.

'These old preppy farts aren't all that good. Especially when they've been drinking in the sun all afternoon. There's only a few of them you have to look out for, and I know who they are.'

Tank thinks this is hilarious—old preppy farts. Henry breathes a sigh of relief. There's no way Finn is going to bust him.

'Come on. Follow my lead,' says Finn, leading the way. One of the men is sporting a full on blue and white seersucker suit, except that the pants are shorts. He is wearing bright yellow knee socks with an odd blue-lobster pattern. The other man also wears shorts—tomato soup red combined with a cross-checked, pale green and white button down, short sleeve shirt. Both of the women are elegant in full length dresses of pale lavender and peach. Lavender Dress Lady has short-cropped, white hair and warm, athletic skin. Peach Dress Lady is red haired and covered in freckles.

The four look over in warm greeting as Finnegan approaches. Seersucker Man holds out his hand to shake.

'Jimmy Finnegan!' he exclaims. 'Great to see you here!'

'Finn! Nice to see you!' Lavender Dress Lady says. 'So glad you could make it!'

'Benjie,' says Finn, shaking Seersucker Man's hand. 'Betsy,' smiling at Lavender Dress Lady.

The boys stand obediently behind Finn, waiting to be introduced. Benjie plays the host.

'Finn, you know Vince Worthington, I think? And my cousin Alex? Alexandra Worthington, this is our great friend Jimmy Finnegan.'

Henry thinks he has never seen anyone with so many freckles as Peach Dress Lady, Alexandra Worthington. Tank can't keep his eyes off of Benjie's bright yellow knee socks.

'Yes. Shewa. Hello, everybody,' says Finnegan, a big broad grin lifting up his estimable mustache. He shakes Vince's hand and nods to Alexandra.

'And do you all know my two friends heya, Henry and Theadore Dickerson? These are Alice Dickerson's grandsons. How 'bout that!' Finn ushers the two boys forward. They quite properly shake everyone's hand.

'Alice Dickerson? Post Office Alice? Of course! How are you boys?' Betsy plays the enthusiastic hostess. 'Enjoying yourselves? I'm afraid there aren't many of your age here today. You'll just have to put up with us older folks.'

Henry decides that this is a good time to polish off his vodka lemonade. He's not sure he likes hearing his Gama referred to as "Post Office Alice". He sees with a glance that Tank caught the turn of phrase as well.

'Or...they could play a little croquet, huh?' Finnegan asks, turning to the boys. 'What do you say, guys? Want to hit some balls?'

'Sure! Of course!' Alexandra exclaims. 'Do you boys know how to play?'

The boys smile and nod.

'Sure,' they say together.

'Well, *great!* Let's get you set up! How about it?' says Betsy.

'I have an ideya,' says Finnegan. 'How about we play teams? The three of us, Henry, Tank and me, we will challenge you faw to a game. Or two and two, howevah you choose. What do you say?'

Henry marvels at how Finnegan makes his suggestion sound like a completely novel idea that he just came up with on the spot. His respect for Finnegan begins to grow. Tank is paying attention too.

'I have a better idea, if I can get Vince to cooperate?' Betsy Webster says, hopefully. 'I know Alex is itching to play, and Benjie, of course, loves croquet. I'm not so keen and I'm really not very good. So, Finn, why don't you and the boys play with Benjie and Alex and I'll take Vince off by myself for a while?'

Everybody stands for a moment grinning at each other, doing the math, sizing each other up.

'Sure!' Benjie says, with enthusiasm after a pause. 'Why not! Splendid idea.'

It's settled. The five players go to select their colors.

Alexandra reaches in quickly and grabs the shiny green ball.

'My favorite,' she says to Tank.

Tank picks orange, much to Henry's relief. He picks blue.

Benjie is yellow. Benjie is always yellow.

'I guess that leaves me with red or black,' says Finnegan. 'I'm Irish. I'll go with black.'

The players line up to see who can hit their balls closest to the white flagpole thirty yards away up the hill. That will decide the order of play.

'Benjie,' says Finn, interrupting his swing. 'What if we made this a little more interesting?'

Benjie lowers his mallet and looks at Finn with what he hopes is a crafty smile. Benjie is on his second—or third—G & T of the day.

'The boys would be exempt, of course. This is just for us,' Finn says.

'What do you have in mind?' Alexandra asks.

'Oh, nothin' so crude as cash. I was thinkin', I don't know, dinnah at the Surf Club for faw? Or two, if you think faw is too much? We could exclude the bahrtab, if you want,' Finn adds, judiciously.

'Oh, *hell* no.' says Alexandra. 'If we're going to do this, we're doing it right. You're on! Dinner for four, full bar tab! Are you in, Cousin?' she asks Benjie.

'Um, sure, I'm all in!'

'Good! That's settled!' says Alexandra, as she whacks her ball to within two feet of the pole.

'I'm the host,' says Benjie. 'I go last here.'

Tank hits his ball to within a respectable seven feet from the flag.

'Well done, young Tank,' says Alexandra with a gracious smile.

Henry over-hits and lands about twenty feet beyond.

'Darnit.'

Finnegan is next. He badly misjudges the slope of the hill and his ball sails past the flagpole and well beyond into a slight depression on the other side of one of the rosebeds bordering the pitch.

'Damn,' Finn mutters under his breath.

Benjie makes a conservative hit, just enough for what he needs, and they choose up.

'I'll go fourth,' Alexandra announces, picking up her bright green ball. Finnegan guesses that Alexandra is just a bit over fifty but she grins like a schoolgirl. He likes the way her freckles crinkle across the bridge of her nose when she smiles.

Tank opts for third and Henry takes the fifth position.

'Second,' says Benjie. He would have offered to go first but he is afraid Finnegan might think he was being condescending.

'Well, I guess it's number one for me,' says Finn, dutifully accepting his lot.

They line up behind the striped endpost and Finnegan goes first. Looking a little ill at ease, he barely navigates his black ball through the first two wickets with one shaky stroke and turns to the right. He under-hits his ball halfway to the next wicket, and then over-hits and ends up in the roses again, a good fifteen feet off the playing green.

Benjie is next. With an adroitness surprising to Tank and Henry, he clears the first two wickets in one fluid shot and then, in two, places himself perfectly in line with the third wicket, about two feet away. An easy next shot.

Tank is also through the first two in one and heads right as well. With his two extra hits he is able to connect with Benjie's yellow ball. Two more shots, and Tank is through the third wicket and off toward the center of the green.

Now it's Alexandra's turn. Benjie turns his mallet upside down and sits back on the head. He crosses his arms and, catching Finnegan's eye, gives a little nod at Alexandra coming through the first two wickets in one. With a crack, Alexandra sends her ball straight into Benjie, knocking him well out of line and stopping directly in front of the third wicket herself.

'Addies, Benjie?' Alexandra asks, swinging her mallet between her legs and eyeballing her next shot.

'No, Alexandra,' Benjie admonishes. 'One after each wicket, no addies. Two at a time is the max. And you can't go back through any wicket, you lose a turn. You know all that.'

'Right,' she says, knocking her ball through the third wicket.

'Are we playing Poison?' Alexandra asks.

'No, just the straight game this time. None of your highjinx.'

Alexandra turns around and hits back, bouncing Benjie's ball a disrespectful two more feet further, past the wicket. Setting up her ball a mallet's head away from the yellow ball, she says, 'Two,' and expertly whacks her ball out to the middle, cleanly knocking into Tank's orange ball.

'One,' Alexandra says confidently.

Neatly positioning the green and orange balls together, she puts her foot firmly on her own and gently sends Tank's ball just to the other side of the fourth, center wicket.

With one more shot she is through and clacks into Tank again. With her next two shots she is up and through the fifth wicket and authoritatively hits her ball down the green to the two wickets standing at the far end of the course. There, she is perfectly aligned.

'Nothing sticky about that wicket,' says Benjie to Finnegan.

'Nope,' Finn nods respectfully.

'Be careful, young man,' Benjie tells Henry, as he lines up his first shot. 'This is not a game of chance, trust me on that.'

Henry makes the first two with one hit and turns right like the others. With two more hits Henry knocks into Benjie, takes his two shots, makes it through the third wicket, and hits down following after Tank into the middle. Henry is just able to position his blue ball directly in front of the center wicket, ready for his next try.

'Nicely done!' Finnegan says approvingly. 'Nicely done.'

'You're up again, Mr. Finnegan,' says Alexandra, with a confident smile and a nod. Finnegan grunts and moves over towards where his ball is nestled in the rose bushes. Using his mallet, Finn manages to fish out his ball so as to avoid trodding on any of the blue and purple pansies along the

border. He makes a respectable shot to bang into Benjie's ball only a few feet away. With the next two shots he is through the third wicket. Turning toward the center of the pitch and aiming carefully between his legs, Finn gives his ball a mighty *WHACK!* The black ball bounces away, cleanly missing both Tank's and Henry's balls altogether, and ends up, once again, fifteen feet out of line, this time on the left side of the course over by the eighth wicket.

'DAMMIT!'

'This is not looking so good for Finn,' Tank asides to Henry.

Benjie is now badly behind and not looking very happy. He shoots for the third wicket and barely bounces through. He takes his one shot to place himself in the middle of the green.

Tank piggy-backs off Henry and is able to get up to the fifth wicket, in position.

Now it's back to Alexandra. She is through the pair at the far end and bangs up against the post in one shot. Back through, she has two shots to hunt down Finnegan, sitting alone near the eighth wicket.

Alexandra hits Finnegan and takes two to get through number eight and back to Finn.

Alexandra is cocky.

'I'm going to be merciful, Mr. Finnegan. I'm only going to take two,' she says with a satisfied grin as she lines up her next shot.

Those two shots are enough to get Alexandra back through the center wicket. With deadly accuracy, she hits Benjie, takes two, gets through the ninth wicket, and in one shot sets herself up directly in front of the final double wickets for an easy win on her next turn. She scans the green with complete self-assurance.

Henry, also lagging badly, hits through the center fourth wicket and sets himself up for the next one alongside Tank at the number five.

Back to Finnegan, set off to the left, who also lags far, far behind. Finn stands back and coolly appraises his situation. He can take his one shot and hit back into the center, hoping to be able to get in position to come through the right way on his next turn and follow the pack. This is what any normal player would reasonably do, but not if he wants to win.

Instead, Finn approaches his ball and plants his feet firmly on either side. Taking careful aim, he hits all the way across the green and connects to Alexandra's ball with a loud *CLACK!* Alexandra shakes her head in disbelief.

'Wow! Lucky shot!' Finnegan feigns surprise.

Alexandra eyes Finn warily as he approaches the two shiny balls, green and black.

‘What to do?’ Finn ponders aloud. ‘What to do?’

Without returning Alexandra’s gaze, Finn sets his foot down on his ball and slams Alexandra all the way back through the entire pitch around the pair of far wickets and under a rhododendron at the opposite end of the lawn.

‘Now it’s on.’ Tank whispers to Henry, standing next to him off to the side.

With his one remaining shot, Finnegan heads back into the center and connects to Benjie with a very clean hit. He is through the center wicket and well beyond. Now he takes aim at Tank. With a clacking of balls, he hits the orange and takes two shots to get back through the fifth wicket. Using Henry as leverage, Finn continues down to the far pair, is through both in one, hits the post, comes back, hits Tank again, hits out to the eighth wicket. Flying now, he comes back to the center to bounce his ball off Benjie again, who is sitting like a plump chicken in the middle of the course, looking thoroughly deflated. Through the center, back on to Benjie, out to number nine and through again. With his last remaining shot, he aligns himself perfectly in front of the final two wickets. An easy last hit for the win.

Finnegan turns his mallet upside down and sits on the head, crosses his ankles, and looks back at the wreckage he has wrought. Alexandra glares down at the ground in front of her, devastated.

‘Benjie! What the fuck?’ she sputters.

Benjie shakes his head. ‘Never trust a Finnegan,’ he groans.



After their victory on the playing green, Finnegan takes the boys downtown to the Dairy Queen.

‘You didn’t tell us you were a croquet sharp,’ Henry gurgles between bites of his Turtle Pecan Cluster Blizzard.

Finnegan lounges at the back of the red, fiberglass stall, eyeing the boys with satisfaction. He languidly sucks off the tip of his vanilla chocolate-dip cone.

‘Well, if you knew, you might have given me away.’

Tank assaults his banana split.

‘That was epic! Best takedown ever! Croquet sharp! Hilarious!’

‘I’m glad you enjoyed yourselves,’ chuckles Finn.

‘Oh, man. The look on her face! Him too!’ Henry crows. ‘What’s his name? Benggie? Buggy? What kind of a name is that?’

'Prepster, my friend,' says Finn. 'Benjie. Benjie Webster. Very old money. The Webster family goes way back to the early days of Pearson's Bight.'

Finnegan runs his long tongue around the base of his cone. Ice cream glistens along the bottom of his mustache.

'Finn, speaking of going back to the early days, can you explain to us the reason everything is all blue lobster this and blue lobster that is around here?' Henry inquires.

'Sure I can. You don't know the story?'

'Only bits and pieces,' says Tank.

'Well, it's the story of the sinking of the *Ida Barry*. How much *do* you guys know?'

'We know something about that but it's a little sketchy. Can you tell us the whole thing?'

'Sure.' Finnegan takes a small bite off the edge of his cone. 'So, in May of 1872, the *Ida Barry* sailed into Pearson's Bight and anchored just off the old town pier, which was quite a bit longer than it is now, if you can believe that. The *Barry* was a packet boat out of Boston that made regular runs to New York and back. She would stop in here going both ways, bringing in mail, freight, and occasionally passengers.

'On this day, a man named Horace Webster, great-grandfather to Benjie Webster, who you met today, was bringing his young bride Adelaide to visit their relations, the Coffins. You also met one of those today. Alexandra Worthington is a Coffin.'

'Wow, they just don't go far from the roost, do they?' Henry says.

'No, some don't. Funny, huh?' Finn carefully bites off a piece of chocolate. He examines his cone, this way and that, looking for his next line of attack.

'Anyway, there had been a problem on the boat soon after leaving Boston. One of the crew members was accused of stealing a small, silver jewelry box from Mrs. Adelaide Webster. Legend has it that inside the silver box was a small, enamel blue lobster with ruby red eyes. The thief's name was John Simons. Simons was found out and restrained in irons by the captain. They put him in the forecastle of the ship, to be dealt with when they got to New York. But, the silver jewelry box was missing.

'The story goes that when Horace and Adelaide were being ferried to the pier in the longboat, there was a sudden, massive explosion on the ship that killed almost everyone on board and sunk her to the bottom. You can still see what's left of her masts at low tide over to the west of the breakwater.'

Finn gazes out over the water.

'Oh, yeah, I knew some of that,' says Henry excitedly. 'I didn't know the bit about John Simons being in leg irons. What made the ship blow up, Finn?'

'One of the survivors said that Simon had an accomplice in the crew, a buddy, who wanted to create a diversion and break Simons out. He lit a small fire in the hold, so it goes, that found its way to a keg of gunpowder. He blew that ship sky high.'

Finnegan goes on. 'So, when the ship exploded, some of the passengers on the longboat stood up to see better. You never stand up in a rowboat, right? Well, the longboat turned turtle and everyone went in the drink. Mrs. Webster was dressed in a heavy woolen dress and she sunk like a stone and drowned. Her husband, no big hero, I guess, survived. Miraculously, so did their two year old son, Isaiah. Isaiah is Benjie Webster's grand-father. They dragged the harbor and found Adelaide but there was no sign of the little silver jewelry box. People figured she would have had it on her but maybe it has been hidden somewhere on the ship. Anyway, no one ever found it, and no one has seen it to this day.'

'Wait,' says Tank. 'Before. Did you say little blue lobster with ruby red eyes? Like real rubies?'

'Yes, that I did. And that is why you will occasionally see divers and people walking the shore with metal detectors. Everyone hopes to find the little silver jewelry box with the ruby eyed blue lobster.'

'And that's why it's all blue lobster all the time here, huh?' Tank asks, scrapping chocolate syrup off the bottom of his boat-bowl with his pink plastic spoon.

'Yep, that's about the size of it,' says Finn, with a final, satisfying crunch of his waffle cone.

Henry slurps up the last of his Blizzard. Finnegan carefully wipes his mustache with a paper napkin. They get up and head out.

Walking back to the truck, Finn asks, 'By the way, who are you guys taking to dinner at the Surf Club?'