

There's Always A Price

Leo Guilford stared vacantly at his drink as he rolled a toothpick between his fingers. He thought about the years of sacrifices, daily workouts, incessant practicing, and cheap motel rooms it had taken to get where he was today. He wouldn't call it work, as he had always loved golf. Still loved it. And of course he loved winning. The junior tournaments at his father's course. Being the star player in high school. Starting all over again in college, and working his way up to an undefeated senior year. He led his team to a conference championship that year, and that summer he placed third in the US Amateur. He might have won, if it hadn't been for a bad bounce on 17.

Then the lean years began. He turned pro and started grinding it out on the Hooter's tour. Borrowing money, begging for sponsors, and driving a clapped out Chevy from one tournament to the next. It was a whole new level of competition, but he stuck with it. He remembered how excited he was the first year he actually won enough money to cover his expenses. He stepped up to the Nationwide tour and started at the bottom again. He was just beginning to win at that level when his dad died. In addition to being a great personal loss, this was a professional loss as well. His dad had always been his greatest supporter. He gave him money when times were tough, and cosigned bank loans to keep him on the tour. He also helped him find sponsors through his network of friends at the club. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was enough. His dad left him a small inheritance, not enough to work his way through the Nationwide tour but enough to pay the entry fee to "Q" school. He knew it was his last chance, and he made the most of it. He finished 17'th overall, which was enough to get his tour card.

"Is this how it ends?" he wondered? His dream had always been to make it on the PGA Tour. All though high school and college, through all the years on the lesser tours, he'd never doubted he had what it took to be a champion. Only now his first year on tour was nearly over, and he hadn't earned enough to keep his card for the following year. After he paid his expenses, and the loans that were coming due, he'd be hard pressed to be able to afford "Q" school again. And if he did scrape together the entry fee, there was no guarantee he'd win a tour card again. And no guarantee that if he did win his card he'd do any better than he did this year. Sure he'd had a bad year, and he'd played better golf in the past, but was that all behind him? All those years working his way up the ladder he studied the winners, watched every move they made, and paid no attention to the back-markers. And now, with sickening clarity he realized that for every player who made it to the top, there were dozens of players who almost made it. Players who made the tour for one, maybe two years, and then faded into obscurity. Was he one of them? Could it be that he just wasn't good enough? And if he couldn't make a living playing golf, what else could he do? All those years, he'd never even considered anything else. Was there anything he was good at?

He tipped his long-since emptied glass onto its side and tried to flip a wadded up piece of napkin into it with the toothpick. It bounced off the edge and refused to go in. Hell, he couldn't even putt a napkin into a cocktail glass.

“Keep your index finger straight” said a voice behind him. An elegant woman’s hand with long, slender fingers picked up the napkin ball and placed it in front of him. He turned his head and saw a stunningly beautiful woman standing beside him. She was wearing a bright red evening dress that revealed just enough cleavage to be exciting but not trashy. She had long chestnut hair and the most piercing brown eyes he’d ever seen. “Like this” she said, placing her hand on his and adjusting his fingers slightly. He flipped the napkin dead center into the glass.

“Thanks” he replied. “Play a lot of napkin golf, do you?”

“No, but I’m pretty good at playing people. Especially men. And I recognize talent when I see it. I hate to see it go to waste. Such a lost opportunity.” She pierced him with another brown-eyed gaze.

Leo shifted uncomfortably on the bar stool. There were always golf groupies flitting around the tour, hoping to spend the night with someone famous and maybe siphon off a bit of the winnings, but they didn’t bother with back-markers like him. And this woman definitely didn’t fit the profile.

“Cigarette?” she offered, holding out a pack. Her voice had softened a bit, as though she sensed she was coming on too strong.

“No thanks. I’m trying to quit.”

“Probably one of the reasons you’re in a slump. Cigarettes help calm your nerves during a match. You certainly didn’t worry about smoking when you burned up the course at Q school. Six consecutive birdies, wasn’t it?”

Leo stared at her in amazement. “You watched me play at Q school?”

Her face softened into an enigmatic smile. “It’s my business to watch people” she said. She shifted her eyes to the upturned glass. “Your glass is empty. Let’s find a booth and I’ll buy you another.” There was something irresistible about the way she uttered those words.

Leo opened one eye and looked at the hotel alarm clock. It was 9:37 on a Sunday morning. Plenty of time to make his tee time, but church was out of the question. Probably just as well, considering the night he’d had. You were supposed to go to church to repent nights like that, but he didn’t feel at all repentant. He rolled over on his side and softly stroked her dark brown hair. Jill. She said her name was Jill. They had talked long into the night, but he never did find out what she was after. Mostly they just talked about him. His past. His dreams. His current slump. She seemed to understand a lot about golf, but she didn’t say much. Occasionally she’d offer a word of encouragement, but it was all mental stuff. Building up his ego, when to take a chance, when to play it

safe, how to tell when your opponent was trying to psych you out – that sort of stuff. Nothing technical about improving his swing, and she didn't talk about herself at all.

As he watched, she opened her eyes and smiled. Then she reached out her arms to him. There was still time.

That afternoon Leo played the best golf since he'd joined the tour. It wasn't that he was making incredible shots, he just wasn't making bad shots. He wasn't making the kind of mistakes that cost you a stroke here and a stroke there. He started pretty far down because of the way he'd played the last two days, but he was slowly working his way up through the field. Occasionally he'd catch a glimpse of Jill in the gallery, and just knowing she was there gave him confidence. He was held up on the 7th, waiting for the group ahead to clear the green so he could tee off. He smoked a cigarette while he waited and then he saw her in the crowd. She gave him a little smile and a nod and then drifted off, looking for a better view of the fairway.

His first real mistake came on the 17th. It was a long, dogleg to the right, but he'd sliced into the rough well short of the turn. His caddie handed him a 7 iron and he prepared to chip back onto the fairway. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Jill looking at him with dismay. Almost imperceptibly she nodded her head "no." Then she looked up at the trees off to the right. He stopped and thought about what she'd said about risk. The fairway shot was the safe shot. He could make that shot in his sleep, but it would almost guarantee him a bogey. A bogey would keep him well down in the pack, and he'd lose his tour card at the end of the year. The tree shot was much riskier. Odds were he'd miss it and come out with worse than a bogey. The end result would be the same. He'd still lose his card, he'd just lose it from further down the list. On the other hand, if he made the tree shot he just might get a birdie. A few more shots like that in the remaining tournaments and there was a chance he could keep his card. . .

He handed the 7 iron back to his caddie and asked for his 5 wood. "Are you sure?" his caddie asked as he handed him the club. Leo took a couple of practice swings, forced himself to breathe slowly, stepped up to the ball, and sent it sailing over the trees. He could tell by the roar of the crowd that it landed near the green.

That night he and Jill celebrated with champagne in his room. It was his best finish of the year, and there were still two tournaments left before the tour ended. They laughed as they replayed every hole in conversation, adding embellishments as the night progressed. They talked about the upcoming tournaments, speculating as to what Leo's chances were. Then Jill got serious.

"That caddie's got to go" she announced.

“Old Bill? He’s one of the most experienced caddies on the tour. I was lucky to get him when Davidson retired.”

“His experience didn’t help you today. Did he ever tell you anything you didn’t already know, other than yardages and data any bag toter could give you? Sure he recommends clubs and tells you to play it to this side or that side, but you already know that stuff. Did he ever build up your confidence? Did he tell you what your opponent’s weaknesses were? And when you were about to blow it on the 17th, he just smiled and handed you the club that would have lost you the match. He’s got to go.”

“But Bill’s almost like a father to me. And he’s got a wife. And a grandson with leukemia. He needs this job.”

“There’s always a price” Jill replied. “And in this case the price of being a nice guy is losing. What’s Bill going to do when you get kicked off the tour at the end of the year? He’s going to be out of a job then anyway. You need to let him go now, while you’ve still got a fighting chance of making next year’s tour.”

“Who am I going to get to loop for me this late in the season?” Leo asked, trying a different approach.

“Me” said Jill. Leo started to laugh but stopped when he saw she was dead serious. There was an awkward silence while he tried to think of something to say but failed. Then Jill broke the deadlock. “Let’s sleep on it” she said.

Firing Bill was the toughest thing Leo had ever done, but he did play better golf with Jill as his caddie. She never made a mistake calculating yardages, and could instantly estimate the distances required for different approach paths. She built him up, and gave him the courage to take risks when the stakes were worth it. She didn’t give him technical advice, but because he felt better about himself his swing was more consistent and he made fewer mistakes. Golf Digest devoted a sidebar to his remarkable turnaround, ending ominously with the words “did it come too late?” As it turned out, it didn’t come too late. Leo finished the season 125th in the rankings. Just barely high enough to make the cut for next year’s tour. In addition to the money he won in the last few tournaments of the year, he finally attracted some sponsorship money. He and Jill celebrated with a trip to Nassau, followed by a skiing trip to Aspen. He dumped his Chevy and bought a new BMW. Then he bought a house in Florida. After years of living in motels, it was good to finally unpack his bags in a place he could call home. It was also within walking distance of a golf course, so he could start practicing for the upcoming season. At night he and Jill would party with friends, or hit the clubs in nearby Miami. He finally felt like a success.

Leo had never lived such a busy life, and he had never had a lover like Jill. Perhaps “lover” wasn’t the right word. They had fun together, he enjoyed her company, and they had terrific sex, but he had a nagging feeling that it was business more than love that kept her at his side. One night, after a terrific dinner and a long intimate session in the bedroom, he decided to ask her straight out if she loved him. They were sitting together on the deck, watching the moon rise over the Gulf, and the time seemed right. Before he could utter a word, however, she started giving him advice on how to get the mental edge on his opponents.

“Aw for Christ’s sake” he said with annoyance. “Don’t you ever think about anything but golf? And why the hell do I need a mental edge over the guy I’m playing with? I could understand it in match play, but most of the time it doesn’t matter what he shoots. We’re all just trying to get the lowest total score.”

Jill looked at him like he’d just asked the stupidest question in the world. “What does it matter? It matters because you’ve got to beat him. You’ve got to beat everyone on the course, but he’s the only one you can see. He’s your enemy. You’ve got to make him fear you. You’ve got to tie his stomach in knots and make him play his worst golf ever. If you let him get the upper hand, if you let him beat you, you’re just one notch further down the totem pole. You won’t win the tournament if you don’t beat your opponent.”

“Bobby Jones said he never won a tournament until he learned to ignore his opponent and play against Old Man Par.”

“Bobby Jones was an amateur. He didn’t have to win for a living. He also was a once in a lifetime phenomenon who played so well it didn’t matter how his opponent played. You’re no Bobby Jones. You can be a winner, but only if you really want it. If I didn’t believe that I’d pack my bags and leave tonight.”

Leo picked up his glass and walked into the house in disgust. He had his answer.

Leo didn’t have much time to fret about his relationship with Jill. The new season was coming up fast and he found himself spending more and more time working out and practicing. His sponsorships and business activities started to become a problem too, but Jill stepped in and began managing them. She also handled his travel arrangements and anything else that threatened to distract him from golf. He was able to focus on his game, and his game got better. By the time the tour got underway he was ready to take the field by storm. Hawaii, California, Arizona – he was shaking up the leaders and threatening to win his first tournament. He was getting much more than a sidebar in the golf magazines now. They were writing feature articles about him, and everyone wanted an interview. Jill stepped into the role of press secretary like she was born to it. She seemed happier now that he was winning, and warmer too. The night on the deck seemed like it had happened ages ago. A minor hiccup in what was becoming a very close relationship.

By the time April rolled around Leo was on top of the world. He shot a blistering 64 on the opening day of the Masters, leading the field and nearly tying the course record. He cooled a little in the following days, but never fell below third and finished the semi-final round tied for second place, two strokes behind the leader. He tried to go to bed early that night, but sleep wouldn't come. He and Jill lay together in the darkness, talking late into the night.

"Leo" Jill said shortly after midnight. "Do you believe in God?"

The question caught Leo by surprise. It seemed totally out of character for Jill. "Why yes, I suppose so" he answered.

"Why does he let bad things happen to good people?"

"I don't think it's so much that he lets them happen. They're a consequence of the fact that he gave us free will. We can choose to do good or evil. We can find cures for diseases or we can go to war. If a child gets a disease which we can't cure because we spent our money on bombs instead of research, that's the consequence of a decision we made with our own free will. If an old woman is killed by one of the bombs we bought, that's another consequence. God couldn't step in to stop these things without denying us free will."

"So you don't think God answers prayers?" Jill asked.

"It depends on what we pray for. I knew a priest when I was a boy who told me not to pray that I would pass a test. He said God's not going to change your test score. You pray to God for the strength and discipline to study for the test. God may help you prepare, but you've got to pass the test on your own."

"That's very interesting" Jill said thoughtfully. "I never met anyone who thought free will was so important. Where in the Bible does it say that God gave man free will?"

"Well," Leo said hesitantly, "that's sort of my own interpretation of Genesis. I think the story of Adam and Eve is allegorical. I believe in evolution. The lower animals have no knowledge of good and evil. In essence they have no free will. They live by instinct and do what seems right to them. If they kill another animal, if they move into a neighbor's territory, or if they steal their brother's mate, they're not being evil. They're just doing what animals do. We evolved from those animals, and eventually our brains developed to the point where we could understand the difference between good and evil. We ate from the tree of knowledge, and ever since then we've been torn by the decision between doing what we want to do or doing what's right. We were cast out of the Garden of Eden, where God made all our decisions for us, and forced to live in a world of our own making."

Jill thought about this for a while. "Do you believe in heaven and hell?" she asked.

“I don’t believe a just God would condemn a soul to live in torment for all eternity, just for mistakes he made during the few brief moments we call a lifetime. That’s not any kind of justice I can believe in. He may have given us free will, but we’re not supermen. There are too many temptations, too many weaknesses, bad upbringing, mental weaknesses, shades of gray. Don’t get me wrong. I think men need to hold men accountable for their actions. There has to be punishment on earth or society would fall apart. But punishment after death? I just don’t buy it.

“And is there a heaven?”

Leo hesitated for a moment and sighed. “I try to believe in it, but I just can’t believe we’re that important. Of all the animals on earth, and all the creatures that might exist on other planets, God singled us out for eternal life? I wish I could believe in heaven, but even my ego isn’t that big. I think we’re here for a moment and then gone forever.” He reached over and stroked her arm. “That’s why we need to make the most of the time we have.”

They lay in silence for a long time. Finally Jill spoke. “Do you want to win the tournament tomorrow?”

“The Masters?” Leo answered immediately. “Hell yes! It’s what I’ve worked for all my life.”

“And the other tournaments? Do you want to be a champion? Do you want to have fame? And fortune? And power?”

“And women?” Leo teased.

“If you wish.” Jill answered matter of factly.

“Hey, I was just teasing, honey. Why would I want other women when I’ve got you?”

“I’m not teasing.” Jill turned to face him. He could see her eyes glistening in the faint light. She was staring straight into his eyes. “I can make that happen. You can be a winner and have more wealth and power than you’ve ever dreamed of. You can play the best golf of your life. But there is a price. There’s always a price.”

“Hey, what is this?” Leo rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling. He suddenly found eye contact uncomfortable. “Some kind of a pact with the devil? You’re freaking me out!”

Jill rolled onto her back. “Well, I don’t have horns and a pointed tail. I don’t dance around with a pitchfork. I don’t kill swine, or fornicate with barnyard animals, or do any of those wild things you read about in fairy tales. But that is more or less what I’m proposing. I can make your dreams come true, and you would be forever in my debt.”

“And my soul would roast in Hell forever.”

“Don’t be silly. You already told me you don’t believe in Hell.”

“Then how would I pay this price?” Leo was getting very uncomfortable with this conversation. He was beginning to suspect that Jill had some sort of a mental problem, but he was playing along because he didn’t know what else to do.

“Oh, I don’t know. You’d be amazed at the avenues that are open to a sports superstar. Maybe you could get on a corporate board and influence their decisions. Endorse products that I believe in. Nothing too terrible.” She smiled slightly. “Maybe even seduce a few women. Not ugly ones, I promise. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Or kill a few people. Or rob a few banks. No thanks.”

“You wouldn’t have to do anything you didn’t want to. You’d still have free will. I can’t change that. All I can do is present people with opportunities and let them decide for themselves what they want to do.”

“And if they decide not to do what you ask?”

“Well, you know how sometimes you hear in the news about a bank president who got caught with his hand in the till? Or a Hollywood mogul who got busted for selling drugs? Or somebody else who’s really rich and famous until suddenly it all falls apart? Sometimes those are people who decided to exercise their free will.”

Leo lay in silence for a long time. The scariest thing was that he half believed her. The whole idea seemed so outrageous. So confusing. “What do you get out of this?” he asked.

“That’s hard to explain.” Jill replied. “It’s sort of like a side bet. You know how sometimes when you’re playing golf people will bet on whether you win or lose? You didn’t make the bet, but what you do affects these other people. What people do really does affect me. It’s like a side bet that’s been going on for thousands of years.”

“Why don’t you just do this stuff yourself?”

“I can’t just wave my hands and work magic. Besides, my interest is in what people do, not in what happens. It’s like what that priest told you. I’m not going to pass a test for you. But if you decide of your own free will that you want to pass a test, I can give you the strength and the power to do it. You’d be amazed at how much power I can give you.” Jill replied. She thought for a moment and then added “I have no hands on earth but yours.”

“Saint Teresa was referring to Jesus when she wrote that.”

“It works both ways.” Jill said. “Look. I know this is confusing, and you really don’t know whether or not to believe me. Trust me. I can make this happen, but only if you want it to happen and you work with me. Let’s just sleep on it, and tomorrow you go out and play golf and see how you feel. If you win, we’ve got a deal.”

After she said this, she leaned over and kissed him. When their lips touched, Leo felt a chill run through his body. He didn’t know how he knew, but suddenly he was absolutely convinced that everything she had said was true.

The next morning Jill acted as if nothing had happened. She was all business, which was usual on the day of a tournament, going through the standard routines and checklists to make certain everything was ready and nothing distracted him from his game. Except, of course, that he was distracted. He was paired with Diego, the leader by two strokes, but he barely noticed Diego’s presence. His thoughts kept going back to the night before. Had he dreamt the whole thing? It didn’t seem like a dream, but the thought of Jill offering him a “pact with the devil” seemed too outlandish to be true. That kind of thing didn’t happen in real life. Stories about the devil were for fairy tales and low-budget movies. Maybe he’d just misunderstood her. Then he realized she hadn’t offered a single piece of advice about how to beat Diego. No mind games. No mental strategies. She wasn’t even suggesting clubs. She just gave him the yardages and waited for him to ask for a club. That was definitely a break from the normal routine, and he knew why. She had said that if he won the tournament they had a deal, which meant winning the tournament had to be completely up to him. She’d help him do whatever he wanted, but the choice had to be his. Without thinking he looked up at her while he was addressing the ball on 3. She looked straight at him and nodded her head almost imperceptibly as if to say “Yes, that’s correct.” God, could she read his thoughts, too? He opened his club face a bit and deliberately sliced into the rough. It wasn’t enough to put him in real trouble, but it definitely wasn’t a good lie. And it proved that he had control over his shots. There was no “invisible hand” guiding his ball down the fairway.

OK, so she really had offered him this deal. Could she really pull it off? God knows there are a lot of crazies in the world, and a large percentage of them seemed to follow the PGA tour. Last night he was convinced that what she said was true, but that was an emotional reaction. It was late at night, and he was nervous about the tournament. There was no logical reason to believe she was telling the truth. They’d been together for almost 6 months now and she’d never done anything mysterious or supernatural. Dogs didn’t howl when she was around. She’d never cleared a path through the rain or lit a cigarette by snapping her fingers. True, she could burn through money faster than anyone he had ever met, but that was hardly supernatural. She’d also influenced him to start smoking again, he was drinking too much, and partying too heavily. He also realized with regret that he hadn’t called his mother in months, and he’d pretty much lost touch with all his old friends. It didn’t take a devil to do that, though. Any stunningly beautiful brunette with piercing brown eyes could lead a man down that path. But he’d never met anyone else, beautiful or not, who offered him a pact with the devil. And in the six months they’d been together she’d never given any indication that she was

emotionally disturbed. At times he even wondered if she had emotions. She always seemed a bit too cold and logical. She could be wildly passionate, but emotional? Leo suddenly realized the irony of the situation. He had to accept her offer on faith, and faith was always something that came hard to him.

So, he'd have to accept it on faith that the offer was genuine. Was it worth it? Absolutely not. Nobody in his right mind would sell his soul to the devil. He may have said he didn't believe in hell, but he wasn't so certain that he'd risk eternal damnation. And even if hell didn't exist, what about hell on earth? Those bank executives and Hollywood moguls she talked about didn't throw their success away on a whim. Their lives must have been so unbearable, the things she asked them to do so terrible, that they were willing to spend the rest of their life in prison rather than spend another day serving her. Giving up the Masters was trivial compared to what they gave up.

Leo paused for a moment after that last thought. Giving up the Masters? It was what he'd dreamed of and worked for his entire life. Not just the Masters, of course, he wanted to win every tournament the world had to offer. He wanted to be the best golfer in the world, and he wanted the world to acknowledge his mastery. That's what the Masters represented. That's why they called it the Masters. Jill talked about there being a price to pay if he accepted the offer, but now he realized there was a price to pay if he rejected it. He could win the Masters. He felt that in every fiber of his being. But she was asking him to give that up if he didn't want to spend the rest of his life obeying her every command. And just how did you give that up? All his life he'd worked at winning golf tournaments. He didn't know how to go about losing one, at least, losing one without looking like a loser. Why the hell couldn't he just win the damn tournament and then tell her to stuff her offer up that beautiful ass of hers?

Leo felt his anger rising at the unfairness of it all. He jerked the scorecard out of Jill's hand and stared at it. Christ, they'd played nine holes already and he'd given up another two strokes to Diego! He'd been so busy brooding about Jill he'd completely lost focus on his game. At this rate he wouldn't have to throw the match. He was handing it to Diego on a silver platter. He looked up in time to see Diego make a beautiful drive down the 10th fairway. It had to be close to 300 yards, with just enough draw to keep it in the center of the fairway. Diego looked back at him and smiled, as if to challenge Leo to try and top that shot. Leo strode up to the tee determined to do just that. He might not be able to win this tournament, but he sure as hell wasn't going to lose. Not to this guy. He sent his drive flying a good 15 yards past Diego's.

In the years to come people would talk about those last nine holes with awe. Diego played superb golf, but Leo played phenomenal golf. Bit by bit, Leo began to make up his lost strokes. They were even on the 18th tee, and on the green Leo sank a 40 foot putt to go one up. There were still two golfers on the course who had a mathematical chance to beat him, but everyone knew that wasn't going to happen. Jill gave Leo one of the longest and most passionate victory hugs ever seen at Augusta – certainly the longest ever given by a caddie. Still trembling with excitement, Leo walked into the scoring hut to turn in his card.

Jill was waiting for him when he came out. “You made the right decision” she said. “I knew you would. I knew how much winning the Masters meant to you.”

“I made the right decision, all right.” Leo replied. “But I don’t think I’m going to win the Masters. Not with that 8 on number 17.”

“But you shot a birdie 3 on number 17!”

“Really? It looked like an 8 the way you wrote it down. It was a little faint. I had to darken it in a bit before I added up my score and signed the card.”

“Thousands of people saw you shoot a 3 on number 17” Jill said coldly.

“You know the rules” Leo replied. “It doesn’t matter what people saw. What matters is what’s on the card I signed.” Jill stared at him with those piercing eyes. A look of cold fury was on her face. Leo continued. “I believe the traditional lament is ‘Oh what a stupid I am!’”

“You’ll never win another tournament as long as you live.” Jill hissed.

“That may be. I’ll go down in history as the golfer who almost won the Masters. But if I don’t win another tournament, it will be because of the way I play, not because of anything you do. I didn’t win this tournament, so we don’t have a deal.”

Jill stared at him a moment longer. Leo realized he’d never seen so much hate in anyone’s eyes before. Then she threw down his clubs and stormed off the course.

“She does have at least one emotion” Leo said to himself. He picked up the bag, took out his pack of cigarettes, and threw them in the trash. He wondered if he still had Old Bill’s phone number. He’d need another caddie, and he had a lot of bridges to mend.