

Hannah and the Sweeties

When the doorbell rang, I thought it would be the driver for DHL, bringing a package, but when I opened the door there was a very small girl standing on the front porch. She smiled big and I saw that her two front teeth were missing, so she must be about six years old.

“I’m Hannah, and I live there” she said, pointing at the new house next door. It had been under construction for nearly a year, and I had met Hannah’s parents when they first visited the empty lot on the corner to plan their new home. They had built a beautiful, large home with a swimming pool and had finally moved in less than two weeks earlier, just in time for school to start.

“Hello, Hannah, I’m Verne. Welcome to the neighborhood!” I stepped out onto the porch and sat on the threshold, which brought me to just about eye level with her. “I’m glad you came to visit.”

“My school is selling raffle tickets for a big-screen television set. Would you like to buy one? They’re going to use the money to build some new classrooms.”

“How much?”

“Ten dollars.”

“Okay. Let me write you a check, then you won’t have to worry if it gets lost.”

I didn’t tell Hannah that when I was her age, my school sent me out to sell something and I lost some of the money. I stepped inside to get my checkbook and came back to the porch to write out the check, which I made out to the school. Hannah carefully wrote me a receipt. It was mostly pre-printed, but she wrote in \$10 and Hannah. For a six-year-old, she gave a real impression of responsibility.

“Thank you, Verne!” She flashed her no-front-teeth smile and ran out the driveway to the next house on the cul-de-sac.

Fall evenings are warm in Harlingen, usually with a breeze out of the southeast to cool the day's mid-ninety degree temperatures. My wife and I walk most evenings, traveling a two mile loop around the neighborhood. Whenever we saw Hannah she would call out "Hi Verne!" and I would answer. With time and, apparently some parental prompting, she started calling me Mr. Wheelwright. Then Mr. Verne. Then just "Hi." I felt she had been intimidated by the demands of adult etiquette.

At first, we saw Hannah nearly every day. She would be shooting baskets in the driveway with her big brother, riding a scooter, playing hop-scotch, drawing chalk pictures on the driveway, and even playing dress up or dolls with a friend.

One day I asked, 'Hannah, do you know what a palindrome is?' She had no idea. "It's a word that is spelled the same way forward and backward. Like Hannah." She smiled, with all her teeth now, but didn't seem certain what to say, but the smile was sufficient.

Hannah was not only energetic in nearly everything she did, she was also athletic. She was on the basketball and soccer teams in her class at school. Her parents both played golf, and she started taking golf lessons at the Country Club, which was just across the street.

She was a natural. Soon she played in her first tournament, and won in her age group. And her Dad was her caddy. Her parents were both proud of her and happy that she was having so much fun with her golf. For her ninth birthday, she received a package of twelve golf balls, each with a tiny red heart on one side and a number on the other. One through twelve.

Hannah was absolutely excited with her gift. "They're beautiful! I'm going to call them my 'Sweeties'!"

She kept them in the original box on her dresser, and when she went to play golf, she would take two with her. And she called them by name; Sweetie Number One, Sweetie Number Two and so on. And she would talk to them like friends whenever she played golf. She would tee up one of her Sweeties, take a practice swing and say, "Here we go, Sweetie!" and "Whack!"

On the greens, she'd carefully eye the distance and the slope, position herself over the ball then, quietly, "Straight into the cup, Sweetie."

Her Dad worried that Hannah would be upset when she lost one of her Sweeties, so he was a little prepared when she sliced Number Nine into the tall rough. He waited patiently while she walked back and forth through the tall grass, pushing clumps aside with her six iron and asking out loud, "Where are you Number Nine?" The she saw him in an open spot between clumps, smiling at her. Smiling?

"Oh Dad, look! I've put a big cut in him! Right under his heart, but he looks like he's smiling!" So Number Nine was retired to his place in the box on her dresser.

Hannah grew that summer. Straight up. She was only nine, but she was nearly as tall as her parents. The growth spurt affected her game in a number of ways, both mechanically and socially. Mechanically because as arms and legs grew, her personal geometry changed. She had to start using her mother's clubs, because her own were too short. She also found that the adults at the Club thought she was older

and expected more of her. But Hannah is a quick learner and coped with all the changes very nicely. And continued to improve her game. Moreover, she still had all twelve Sweeties on her dresser.

Which worried her Dad. He knew she would eventually lose one of the Sweeties and was afraid she would be devastated. But even when he was sure she had lost one, she found it, calling "Where are you Sweetie?"

Then Number Five went into the water. Dad knew that was it. That ball was gone. As they walked from the tee to the pond, Dad tried to prepare her. "Hannah, I don't think you'll find this one. I've put quite a few balls in that pond and never got one back."

"Number Five's been pretty lucky so far, Dad. And it looked like he went in close to the edge. Maybe we'll find him." She showed no signs of the devastation her father had expected. But the determination was clear.

Hannah walked to the edge of the pond, near where she thought Number Five had gone in. She could only see a few inches into the water, no matter how intently she stared. "Where ARE you, Number Five? I don't want to lose you."

She probed a clump of grass that was about a foot from the edge with an iron. He wasn't there. She circled to the left and then to the right. She spotted white! Hannah stepped into the water with one foot and retrieved the golf ball. But it wasn't Number Five. She tossed the ball to her dad. "Here, Dad. It's a brand new Nike!" But it wasn't number Five.

"Hannah, we're going to have to go. There are people playing behind us." She thought she saw something. It was like the water had cleared for just a moment, and she saw the red color. The heart. It must be Number Five. "Just one more minute, Dad!" She waded in, bent over where she had seen the red heart in the water and reached down, her face in the water, reaching for the bottom. Then she felt Number Five, grabbed him, stood up and waded ashore, wet from head to toe. Hannah didn't even look. She knew it was him. She tossed Number Five up onto the grass. "I'll play him from there."

Hannah's father was stunned! Flabbergasted! Relieved. He walked over to Hannah and hugged her, hard. "I can't believe you," he said, "But I do."

Later in the Clubhouse, people were talking about the girl who dove in the pond to get her golf ball. There were lots of jokes about the high price of golf balls and how some people will do anything to save a stroke. But Hannah wasn't at the Club. She was already home and Number Five was safely in his place in the box on her dresser.

During the winter, Hannah played on her class basketball team. Her father coached the team and had a great time. And Hannah and I had found something in common. Cookie dough. For the past two years her school had been selling frozen cookie dough. The first year I ordered raisin oatmeal cookie dough and managed to eat some of the dough before my wife baked the rest into cookies. Hannah said she liked the dough as well as the cookies and I told her I thought maybe the dough was better! But the cookies were good. Hannah knew she had a customer for as long as her school offered cookie dough!

That summer, as soon as school was out, Hannah's golf classes started again, every Tuesday afternoon. She had some close calls with her Sweeties, partly because she had to play faster now. Other players didn't want to wait while she looked for a lost ball. They weren't as patient as her Dad had been and would complain if she held up their game while she looked for a lost Sweetie. So she made a decision.

At dinner, she announced to her family that she had been worrying too much about losing one of her Sweeties, so from now on she wasn't going to use them in practice or family games any more. She would save them for serious competition, like tournaments. And if she lost one, she would just have to accept that it was lost and keep playing. Hannah's mother and father were a little surprised at Hannah's announcement, because they knew she loved her Sweeties. But they admired the maturity of her decision.

A few weeks later, Hannah was starting her first tournament of the summer. She had three Sweeties in her bag; Number One, Number Two and Number Three. All freshly washed and shined. They looked like new. She was playing Number One, and they were doing very well. At every tee shot, she would quietly say, "Here we go, Sweetie!" Then "Whack!"

It was on a sharp dog-leg around the water that Number One went into the deep rough, and Hannah wasn't sure she had seen where the ball had landed. She hoped her Dad had seen better. Confidently "Daddy Caddy" led her to a spot just a little further than she thought she had seen the ball drop. But they could not find Number One. She walked back to where she thought the ball had landed, but still no luck.

"Hannah, you're going to have to play another ball and take the penalty. People are waiting."

She knew. Number One was gone. Her Dad handed her Number Two and she played out the hole and the rest of the tournament with him. She had the lowest score in her age group for that tournament, and won a handsome glass trophy. Her best one so far. She had a big smile when the reporter from the Valley Morning Star took her picture, and more smiles when people came to congratulate her.

In the cart on the way home, there were quiet tears. The kind that break a father's heart. Dinner was quiet, but after the kitchen was cleaned up. Hannah's father said, "Let's go take another look. The course is closed now and there's still light. I'll take a flashlight just in case." Hannah couldn't believe what she had heard. Silently, she hugged her Dad and they went out the door.

In the golf cart, Hannah's father drove across the street, took a short cut through a neighbor's yard and pulled onto a cart path. Hannah was so happy now she was giggling at anything her father said. She was certain they'd find Number One. Soon they were back in the tall grass and Bluebells where they had looked for Number One that afternoon.

In the summer, the South Texas sun stays up even later than golfers do, so they had plenty of light. They started at the point where they had searched in the afternoon and Hannah worked back in the direction from which she had hit the ball while her father looked in the other direction. The sun moved lower, then below the horizon, and the light was fading. As Hannah searched, she talked to Number One,

telling him to stop hiding and let her see him. But he didn't, and she kept looking, thinking they might need the flashlight after all. She never did see him—she felt him. Under her shoe. She knew it wasn't a rock, and when she moved her foot, there was Number One.

“Daddy! I found him! I found him! We must have walked right by him a hundred times!”

As they walked back to the cart, she thanked her father for bringing her back her to look for Number One, telling him how much she appreciated this and all the things he did for her, and held his hand as they walked, having no idea what she was doing to her father's heart. It would be years before he would tell her how important that moment was to him.

There was no announcement this time. Hanna simply retired the Sweeties to their box on the dresser. She'd take them out for putting practice, talking to them like old friends, but she wasn't taking any more chances with her Sweeties. Besides, she knew she might not play her best when there was a risk of losing one of the Sweeties. Even though she'd won the trophy that day, she thought she might have played better if she hadn't been worrying about losing Number One.

The morning of her Tenth birthday, there was a box on the breakfast table for her, but the family was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she was just up too early. So she waited. And decided that was one thing she was really not good at. She was good at golf and basketball and running, but she was not good at waiting. She liked action!

They came into the room singing “Happy Birthday, Hannah.” Even her brother was singing and smiling. Finally, her Mother urged her to open the box on the table. They all watched while Hannah unwrapped the package and opened the box.

It was another box of twelve golf balls, each with a bright red heart.

But no numbers.

The note said, “We are the second string, we have no names. It's OK if we get lost because someone will be happy to find us!”

“YESSSS!”

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