

J. Code Keith

# Jimmy Finnegan

An excerpt



HENRY LOITERS NEAR the refreshment table which is also the bar. He signals his younger brother Tank, who catches the bartender squarely in the back with his frisbee from a good fifty feet away.

*'Sorry!'* Tank yells.

When the bartender turns around to toss back the frisbee, Henry pours several shots of vodka into his tall plastic cup of lemonade.

*'Hey, Slick,'* says Finn, ambling up with his characteristic grin.

*Where did he come from?* Henry wonders.

*'Sandwiches, huh?'* Finnegan says, checking out the spread. *'What kind of sandwiches?'*

*'Some kind of lobster salad, I think,'* mumbles Henry, wondering how much Finn just saw.

*'I thought you told me last yee-a, on my boat, that lobsta salad was disgustin' and had no place in any self-respectin' sandwich.'*

Finnegan sounds exactly like J.F.K.

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

*'Right-O.'*

Finn regards Henry as Tank comes up panting.

*'Hey, Finn!'*

*'Hey, Tank, or Theodore, as your Gama Alice likes to say sometimes. Good to see you. Looks like that arm has healed up nicely. That was a pretty sweet throw.'*

Now Henry is sure Finn saw the whole charade.

*Why isn't he saying anything?*

Finnegan eyes the two boys, sizing them up.

‘Hey, you guys want to have a little fun? Play some croquet?’

‘Croquet?’ asks Tank.

‘Seriously?’ asks Henry, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

‘Sure,’ Finn says. ‘Why not? 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 them.

‘Come on. Follow me,’ says Finn, conspiratorially and leads the way to the two older couples leaning on heavy-looking croquet mallets, chatting amiably. One of the men is wearing a full on blue and white seersucker suit except that the pants are shorts. Blue lobsters on bright yellow knee socks. The other man also wears shorts—tomato soup red 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 is platinum blonde with skin like ivory. Peach Dress Lady is red haired and covered in freckles.

The four smile as Finnegan approaches. Seersucker Man holds out his hand.

‘Finn!’ he exclaims. ‘Great to see you here.’

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

‘Bungie,’ says Finn, shaking Seersucker Man’s hand. ‘Betsy,’ nodding to Peach Dress Lady.

The boys stand obediently behind Finn and to the side, waiting to be introduced.

‘Finn, you know Vince Worthington, I think? And my cousin Alexandra? Alexandra Worthington, this is our great friend Jimmy Finnegan,’ says Bungie Webster.

Henry thinks he has never seen anyone with so many freckles. Tank can’t keep his eyes away from the bright yellow knee socks.

‘Yes. Sure. Hello, everybody,’ says Finnegan, a big broad grin lifting up his estimable moustache. He shakes Vince’s hand and nods to Alexandra.

‘And do you all know my two friends here, Henry and Tank Dickerson? These are Alice’s grandsons. How about 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? 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!’ Betsy gushes.

*Is Betsy Webster flirting?* muses Finn.

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 steals a glance at Tank, who caught the turn of phrase as well.

'Or, they could play a little croquet, huh?' Finnegan asks. '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, boys! How about it?' chirps Betsy.

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

Henry marvels at how Finnegan sounds like this is a completely novel idea that he just came up with on the spot. Henry's respect for Finnegan grows in leaps and bounds. Tank is not far behind.

'I have a better idea, if I can get Vince to cooperate?' Betsy Webster says, as a question.

'I know Alexandra is itching to play, and Bungie, of course, loves croquet,' she continues. 'I'm not so keen and I'm really not very good. So, Finn, why don't you and the boys play Bungie and Alexandra 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!' Bungie says, with enthusiasm. 'Why not?! Splendid idea.'

The five players go to select their colored balls.

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.

Bungie is yellow. Bungie is always yellow.

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

The five players move to the side and set themselves up to see who can get their balls closest to the white iron flagpole thirty yards up the hill to decide the order of play.

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

Bungie lowers his mallet and looks at Finn with what he hopes is a crafty smile. Finn knows Bungie 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, asking for reassurance.

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

'Oh, nothing so crude as cash. I was thinking, I don't know, dinner at the Surf Club for four? Or two, if you think four is too much? We could exclude the bar tab, if you want,' Finn adds, judiciously.

'Oh, hell no,' exclaims 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?'

'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 Bungie. 'I go last here.'

Tank hits his ball a respectable five to seven feet from the pole.

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

Henry over-hits and lands about twenty feet beyond the flagpole.

'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.

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

'I'll go fourth,' Alexandra says, 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 Bungie. 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, Finn hesitantly navigates his black ball through the first two wickets with one 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 rose bed a good fifteen feet off the playing green.

Bungie 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 Bungie'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. Bungie 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 Bungie, knocking him well out of the way and stopping directly in front of the third wicket herself.

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

'No, Alexandra,' Bungie 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 Bungie's ball a disrespectful two more feet further off line. Setting her ball a mallet's head length 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 and 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. Authoritatively, she 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 Bungie to Finnegan.

'Nope,' Finn nods respectfully.

'Be careful, young man,' Bungie 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. With two hits, Henry knocks into Bungie, takes his two shots, makes it through the third wicket, and following Tank, he hits down 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 smile and a nod. Finnegan grunts and moves to his ball, nestled in the rose bushes. Using his mallet to avoid any yellow and purple pansies along the border, Finn manages to fish out his ball. Laying down his mallet one length, he makes a respectable shot, hitting Bungie's ball which had been knocked way out of line and now lies 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! His ball bounces away, cleanly misses 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 isn't looking so good for Finn,' Tank says nervously to Henry.

Bungie 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.

'I'm going to be merciful, Mr. Finnegan.' Alexandra is cocky. '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 Bungie, takes two, gets through the ninth wicket, and in one shot, sets herself up directly in front of the final double wicket. 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 now lags far, far behind. Finn stands back and coolly appraises his situation. He can take his one shot and hit back into the center, positioning himself to come through the right way on his next turn and follow the pack. This is what any reasonable player would normally do.

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 with 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 well into the rose bushes beyond.

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

With his one remaining shot, Finnegan heads back into the center and connects with Bungie 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, shoots through, hits the post, comes back through, hits Tank again, and is out to the eighth wicket. Flying, he comes back to the center to bounce his ball off Bungie again, who is sitting like a plump chicken in the middle of the course, looking thoroughly deflated. Through the center, back on to Bungie, out to number nine and clean through. Aligning himself perfectly in front of the two final wickets, he makes the 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.

‘Bungie! What the fuck?’ Alexandra sputters.

‘Never trust a Finnegan,’ Bungie groans.



After their victory on the playing green, Finnegan takes the boys up the road to 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 as 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? Bunggie? Buggy? What kind of a name is that?’

‘Prepster, my friend,’ says Finn. ‘Bungie. Bungie 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 moustache.

‘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 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 can you tell us the whole thing?'

'Sure. 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 Bungie Webster, who you met today, was bringing his young bride Adelaide to visit their relations, the Coffins. You also met one of today. Alexandra 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's luggage. His name was John Simons. Simons was restrained by the captain and the rest of the crew and put in irons in the forecastle of the ship, to be dealt with when they got to New York.

'The story goes that the stately packet ship was anchored in the Bight. Horace and Adelaide were being ferried to the pier in the longboat, when suddenly there was a massive explosion on the ship that killed almost everyone on board—sinking 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 part 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.

'So, when the ship exploded, some of the passengers on the longboat stood up to see better. You never stand up in a row boat, right? Well, the longboat turned turtle and everyone went in the drink. Ms. Adelaide was dressed in a heavy woolen dress and she sunk like a stone and drowned. Horace Webster, no big hero, I guess, survived.



‘They dragged the harbor and found her, but there was no sign of the little silver jewelry box with the enamel blue lobster and its two ruby eyes. People figured she would have had it on her, but maybe it was in her luggage that was still on the ship. Anyway, no one ever found it, and no one has seen it to this day.’

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

‘Yes, that I did. And that is why you will see divers occasionally 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, finishing off his split.

‘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 moustache with a paper napkin. They get up and head out.

Walking back to the car, Finn asks, ‘By the way, who are you guys taking to dinner?’

‘Huh?’ asks Tank.