

Preferred Lies

A Journey to the Heart of Scottish Golf

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Extract

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You must begin again

So the day came when I climbed into the loft and came down with a former life. The cobwebs clinging to the bag came away with a stiff brush; the grooves in the club faces were filled with fragments of long-gone days from *before*. At the sink, I gave them a quick scrub, but the soil and grass were impacted solid.

Some time back I had passed on my climbing gear to my eldest stepson Joe, a passionate climber, much better than I'd ever been. With Mal Duff dead on Everest, I wasn't going on big mountains again. I'd nearly given Joe the golf clubs too, but not quite. Instead they'd been lugged about on all my moves, last to be loaded, first to be shoved away in a corner. It was a wonder I could still lay my hands on them.

I slung the bag over my shoulder and stepped out into the bright Orkney morning, thinking the wonder was I could lay my hands on anything.

Six months earlier, the walk from my house to the Ness had been a challenge. Though my memory and concentration had improved since I'd finally left hospital, I was still a hollow man, gutted and enfeebled. In the city: too much stimulation, more input than I could handle. Back in Orkney there were fewer things, and bigger: sky, sea, the hills of Hoy across the water. How I needed those simplicities.

Day after day while convalescing I took the walk along the

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narrow street that runs through our town of Stromness, twisting slightly as it follows the shoreline's contours, then opening out as the houses stop. I loved the next stretch, walking above the unbreakable water, smelling salt and seaweed, watching the light bend over Scapa Flow.

Then the road dips down to shore level, past the old boatyard and finally on to the Point of Ness.

On my early outings, I had to rest there. Not-dying takes it out of you in many ways. After a while my eyes would turn from the sea to the golf course laid out above the Sound of Hoy. I took to leaning over the wall, watching golfers tackle the 16th hole. My shoulders began to turn involuntarily as they drove off; my hands twitched as I watched the approach shots into that complex green. I analysed the swings as they drove off next to me on the 17th. I could see why this one hooked, and that one topped; felt satisfaction at the good player's timing, that precise *keesh!* as the ball flew . . .

One afternoon I was leaning over the dyke. The mower was out on the hill and the smell of cut grass travelled downwind, and mingled with the sweet rot of seaweed. I watched a foursome playing and thought: *My God, surely I can do better than that.*

So that morning came when I went into the loft, then carried my bag of clubs over my shoulder to the Stromness course, just as I had done as a lad in Anstruther some forty years earlier, and it may have been the bright warm April morning, or the rattle of the clubs behind my back, but I felt hopeful, full of curiosity, excited for the first time in a long time.

I admit my heart was beating fast as I pushed open the little brown gate and stepped onto the course.

We've seen it in films: the gunfighter, the priest, the ice climber, returning to their old accomplishment. It begins with the equipment, strange yet so natural in the hands again: holster, chalice, crampons. From a broken zip pouch I take out a couple of balls – a bit scuffed, but good enough. A few golf tees. Then

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the flattened, wizened blue golf glove. My father's voice in my inner ear: *It helps remind you the game's played wi' the left hand.*

The glove is cold, worn and slightly musty, but still fits. Standing at the 1st tee, I look around. Apart from two children on the swings and the distant tractor-mower, there's no one about. Good, because this could go horribly wrong.

I choose to play safe and take out the 4 iron. Hands fall into place on the rubber grip. I take a few cautious swings. I could think about pivot, shoulder, weight transference, hip turn, wrist release, but my body seems to know fine what to do.

Quick check to see no one's looking, then I do some yoga stretches. When I watch my youngest stepson Leo, I see he moves in a subtly different way from me. He bounds, flops, lounges, jumps up, all quite fearless and unmeditated. Injury never crosses his body's mind.

I tee up the ball, wonder if that's too low and I might miss altogether, so tee up higher. A couple of faster practice swings. This feels good, the whole kinetic sensation of it. I'm not telling my body to do all these complex things. I just think: *Go*, and it does what comes naturally. Like the first times Lesley and I made love, cautious and gentle, after I came out of hospital.

The gunfighter moves into the street; the priest approaches the altar; the climber clips in – as I step up to the ball, everything becomes very clear. The scuffed dew on the fairway says I'm not the first person out today. Sun warm on my neck as I bend over the ball. Terns peeping by the Ness, gulls tilting over the hill, bairns calling on the swings. I'm alive, surrounded by golf course, sea, life. I'm living in *after*.

I swing. Arm socket and neck jerk as the club head meets little resistance. I look up to see the ball rising near-vertically, veer right, land over the wall in someone's garden.

What a very silly game.

I'm shaking my head, part mortified, part amused, as I tee up another ball – a bit lower this time. Should have trusted myself more.

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OK – no laughter at the back. There is no one at the back. This is just a silly, fun thing I'm trying out because I'm still on the planet and need to recover more than my physical health.

This time the ball flies up that brae like a slingshot, straight and true. I lift my bag and walk up the fairway with golden warmth coursing from my wrists to my heart. The course is alive, I'm alive, I have just hit a proper golf shot, and the first lark of the year is singing way high up.

I think on my dad, last seen seventeen years after his death, when he came to me while I lay in a coma in Hallamshire Hospital Intensive Care. It had been good to see him. He had told me to picture walking up the first fairway at Anstruther, and that helped me hang on.

I look round the glittering course. *Dad, I wish you were here to enjoy this.*

Then I stop mid-stride because I swear to Golf I hear his voice, his real live voice, throaty and amused. *But I am.*

When a man's deid, he's deid, my father would say. I tend to agree with him. Yet all I have ever written starts from voices within, and they are true in their way. As I hit then followed the flight of that little dimpled planet, and set off after it in some kind of erratic, jubilant pursuit, I sensed I was on the track of something, though I had no idea it would take so long to get there.

It wasn't so much that I took up golf again; truth is, it took me up.

It takes me up still.