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Church Of Golf

By

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From Chapters 2 and 3

"Oh, I do believe the late afternoon is the very best time of day for a round, don't you?" Dixie wondered aloud. With her were Ramona and Tina, Ramona's mother.

"I like to play anytime!" exclaimed a happy Ramona. "I just like to play."

Tina put her arm on Ramona's shoulder and whispered. "Quiet, now. Give Miss Dixie a few moments to clear her head."

"But she talked to me. I was just talking back."

"When somebody's on the tee box getting ready to hit, it's usually time to be quiet, even if they say something to you. If you talk to them, it gets in the way. It's just like when somebody's praying. Many times, if they're on the tee box, that's exactly what they're doing."

Dixie stood directly behind her ball and stared past it to the fairway, a flat, inviting expanse that started out narrow and widened about 100 yards out. Beyond that, the fairway planed for just over 200 yards before it reached a pleasingly flat

putting surface. On this day, the flag was center right, just a few inches above a slope that, in most cases, would carry your ball twenty yards off the green into a low spot where rainwater sometimes ponded.



Dixie fixed her eye on a spot in the center of the fairway and imagined where she wanted her ball to land. She lined up next to her ball and after a well-practiced waggle, took dead aim. Her skinny arms with the sunspots all over them started back, slow and graceful, just like the branches of a weeping willow tree floating on a breeze. It wasn't until the top of her swing that her wrists cocked and her club became parallel with the ground. Then her hips began to turn and her arms started downward and built speed until her hips turned almost square with her target line. Her wrists uncoiled with a quick flip, coming around her right hip. The screws on the center of her persimmon-headed three-wood smacked her ball and propelled it in a straight line toward her target. The ball started low, suddenly rose high and then dove nearly straight down and popped onto the center of the fairway, 190 yards from where it started.

"Oh, how lovely," remarked Tina. "Your swing is so beautiful to watch, Dixie."

Dixie nodded and grinned. "Oh, thank you darlin'. But an awful lot of how I play comes from watching you, Ramona." Dixie looked at the young girl, standing next to her mom. "I wish I'd learnt to hit as well as you when I was just ten."

"Mom. She's on the teebox still. And you're talking to her."

"Baby, Dixie's done swinging. It's okay now."

"Mom, this game is complicated when you're around," said the youngster. "When Kahuna plays with me, we talk almost the whole time." Ramona yanked fast at her three wood – so fast that its grip got stuck against the other clubs on the way out. She stopped and gave it a little shake and, after a second effort, managed a clean extraction. She hop-sprinted up to the tee box, sank a tee and balanced her ball. After a glance down the fairway, she lined up. With a movement as sudden as a bolt of lightning, she took a whooshing backswing, putting her club head so far back it dipped below her left shoulder. Then, after a shift of weight from her right leg to her left, her downswing began. Her hips began to turn, her club and arms started down abruptly after and then her ball was on a bullet-like path over the center of the fairway, never more than fifteen yards above the ground. It didn't touch down until it was even with Dixie's ball and then it bounce-rolled for forty yards, coming to rest 230 yards away.

Dixie shook her head. "Tina, what have you been feeding that child? I don't believe there's anybody else in the village who can swing as *purty* as that."

"Kahuna has been working with her," said Tina who was talking to Dixie but looking at Ramona. "He says that she needs to stay humble and keep practicing."

Tina slid a five-iron out of her bag and took her place on the tee box. After a brief set up, and no practice, she took a deliberate and stiff-looking half swing that sent her ball on a sky-high trajectory that ended 140 yards out. "I made it straight out and on the short grass," she gleamed. "That always makes me feel so right." She popped her club back in her bag and the threesome marched up the fairway, ponytails and golf bags bouncing, bouncing, bouncing with every step.

Donald stood alone on the center of his own stage on the first tee at the Eisenhower Golf Course, his feet just beyond shoulder width. The borders of the first fairway ran long and nearly plumb-line straight. The wind stood still. A rare

and unusually warm late-winter sun shone off the bentgrass. All was good and correct. Donald breathed in deeply and slowly, inhaling authority, control and clarity. Was there a better place to be on an afternoon when the dispiriting force of winter had yielded to the gentility of spring?

Donald's hands wrapped around the new and slightly spongy grip on the end of a whisper-thin shaft of graduated steel. His knees were bent slightly and his torso leaned forward. As he shifted his weight toward his right, he pulled his club back with his straightened arms in a slow and wide arc. When his arms and his club were just above parallel, he cocked his wrists and continued his gradual shoulder turn until the club shaft was above his shoulders. Then Donald's hips turned left, toward his target, and his weight began a deliberate shift in the same direction. His arms started their move downward and he laid his club head back slightly, keeping to the inside of his target line. When Donald's hands were almost even with his ball, he released his wrist-cock. The head of his driver *ooshed* through the air and his right hip rotated forward so that he faced the fairway. The head of the driver *spanked* the Titleist that had been obediently waiting. Donald's ball soared straight out and up until it came to rest in the fairway, 224 yards away.

Donald held his balanced stance and shot a confident smirk to Ted, his playing partner for the day. "Was that my ball that just took off? *My ball?* Uh, was that MY BALL? Did you see how far I hit that muthafucka?"

"Yeah, Don. I saw. Maybe now, you'll let somebody else tee off?"

"Yeah, keep your plaid pants on." Donald picked up his tiny white tee, parked it over his left ear and relaxed in the golf cart. As Donald fumbled to light a Marlboro, a wooden *phunk* sounded from Ted' direction.

"Where'd you put it this time, brother?" he queried, as he looked up from the back of the cart.

"Down the center. Out about 170 yards."

"Damn, Ted. You've been hitting the same boring tee shot since you were 15 years old. Why don't you go for a little distance? Put something into it, man."

Ted glanced cold over his shoulder at Donald. "How about this? You play your game, and I'll play mine."



Donald hit the gas pedal in the golf cart and, with Ted inside, zoomed ahead to Ted's ball. Ted grabbed a three wood, set up and swung and put his ball 200 yards away, on the edge of the green.

"Some day you'll have to tell me how you get more distance off the carpet than you do off the tee. It just doesn't seem possible."

"Donald, it's a little like when the missus decides to sleep with a penis-toting cretin like me: I don't know how it happens. I don't know why it happens. It just, you know, *happens*."

Next to Donald's ball, forty-some yards ahead, Donald looked at a nearby yardage marker, pulled out a five iron and surveyed. *Motherfucker. In a divot.*

"Teddy? Holy cow! Did you feel that?"

Ted swiveled his head. "Feel what?"

"That earthquake? Did you feel it?" Donald took the nose of his club and slid his ball out of the divot and onto good grass.

"We had an earthquake? Just now?"

"Yeah, no shit. It must have been at least ninety eight point six on the sphincter scale. It pushed my ball right out of this little divot over here."

Ted smirked. "A little self delusion is a wonderful thing. It has done wonders for *your* scorecard, hasn't it?"

"Holy shit, Teddy. I think you just hurt my feelings."



Donald lined up next to his ball and swung extra hard. The bottom edge of his clubface hit the ball on its equator, sending it on a bullet-like ride. It bounced once on the right side of the green and then dove into tall weeds that grew twenty yards behind it. "Teddy, you little fucker. Look what you made me do."

Ted took a slow breath and gathered some peace. "Donald, I hope you don't ever have to golf alone. Who would you have to blame for your problems?"

After the golf cart was parked greenside, Donald manhandled a 64-degree lob wedge and pulled a putter out of his bag and strong-stepped in search of his ball. He found it nestled in some tall grass.

"Donald, uh, I think you're away," said Ted.

Donald looked down at his ball. "Ah hah hah hah," he exclaimed, as if the small, white ball had ears. "You are mine. *All* mine. And you will *pay*."

Donald practiced an easy takeaway, going back only about halfway, and an easy downswing. He did it again, for confidence. Both times, the curved sole of his

wedge brushed pleasantly against the layer of roots at the bottom of the reedy tangle.

Donald set up and took the same easy takeaway to a half-swing. His downswing began strong and fast. He dug the leading edge of his wedge into the ground, leaving a smile-shaped divot. His ball popped straight up and right back down again, only a few yards closer to the flag. Donald's shoulders drooped. He shook his head, staring hard at the ground where his club had wounded the turf.

"Donald, uh, I think you're away," guffawed Ted, relaxing on the green.

Donald slammed his lob wedge into the ground where it had left its mark. He kicked his prostrate putter and set up anew to address his ball, breathing like a sore, old mule. Without a practice swing, he swung again, this time with barely more than a cock of his wrists. He hit the ball thin and it skittered straight at the slope leading up to the green where it plugged into the green-side soil.

Donald wrinkled his face and adopted a loud falsetto. "*Ooooooh. A little self-delusion has really done wonders for your scorecard, hasn't it?*"

Ted doubled over, laughing and pointing at Donald.

Donald dislodged his plugged ball with the toe of his lob wedge, scooted it up to the hairy fringe of the green and prepared to putt. "If the freaking grounds keepers were doing their freaking jobs, I would have been on the freaking green already. This is like playing on a goddamn cow pasture."

Donald tapped his ball with a firm stroke of his putter, aiming high at the left edge of a small ridge that ran just above the hole. The ball skirted the edge of the ridge, looking for a minute like it would trickle down to the hole. Instead, it clung to the ridge and stopped, still 15 feet uphill from its target.



Donald looked across the green at Ted, who was preparing for his next shot, taking small practice swings with his pitching wedge. "Gimme a sec, this next shot will just drop in." He set up and tapped his ball which gained speed and ran twelve feet past the hole. He walked over to his ball, picked it up and talked to it as he cradled it his palm of his hand. "Your mother and I buy you books to take to school and study. We even buy you a donkey to ride to school. And what do you do? You stand on the books and you *fuck* the donkey." With a flick of his long arm, the kind you could expect from a former quarterback, the ball was forty yards into the leafless woods.

Ted stood off the edge of the putting surface and considered his ball's likely path. He returned his pitching wedge to his golf bag and retrieved a putter. Ted stood over his ball and rapped it firmly. It traveled up the slope, rolled to the right and stopped about ten inches past the hole.

"Gimme!" said Donald, who tossed the ball back to Ted.

Donald retreated to the golf cart and grabbed the scorecard and a pencil. "Ted? Five?"

"Five nothing. I parred."

"Four for Ted. And a six for the legendary Donald."

Ted stared, his mouth hanging open slightly. "Six? Gimme a freaking break. You had your regular drive, a foot wedge outta the little divot, a screaming iron into the weeds, two to the hill, relief from an unplayable lie, another foot wedge up to the putting surface, and then... "

"I shot a six, you sticky little ball of shit. Sheesh. Do you always have to be such a downer?"

Donald maneuvered the cart toward the second tee box. Before Ted could say a word, he strode to the box with his driver in hand and set up.



Four hours later, Donald and Ted meandered to the parking lot, comparing scores. The brothers sat on the back bumper of Donald's Mustang, trunk open, changing out of their golf shoes.

"Donald, how is it that I lend you four thousand dollars for a so-called emergency in October, then you have your Mustang reupholstered in November. And here it's almost March and you're golfing on a workday and not even offering promises for when you'll start paying me off."

"Well, if it doesn't matter whether I pay you, why are you even asking? You remember how back on the first hole I said you were being a downer? Well, you're doing it again."

"It's a fair question. You'd wonder. We both know you would."

Donald took a deep breath and exhaled forcefully through pursed lips. Then he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, staring at his feet. "You know, just because you were a noodle when you were a kid doesn't mean you have to be one as an adult. *Honestly.*"

"Man, look me in the eye. Look me in the *goddamn* eye. This is your brother, not some bill collector. Remember me? I'm the guy who loans you money when you're down, remember? The guy who crawls out of a warm bed at four in the

morning and comes downtown with his checkbook and bails you out of the drunk tank? Is there anybody else in this world who will do for you what I've done? So don't you go shucking and jiving on me. I'm entitled to a straight answer."

Donald slumped and looked at the sky and then faced his brother. "Ted, I'm sorry. I really am sorry. I'm stuck. I feel totally, totally stuck."

"Stuck? You're stuck? What does that mean?"

"Aw, jeez Teddy. Man, the whole world has gotten screwed up in the head. Nobody wants to give me credit for anything. Kimmy hates me. My boss hates me. My customers don't appreciate me. The bill collectors hate me. Some days it seems like you hate me. Nothing's working. I mean, how did I get here? Everybody used to love me. It used to be that people couldn't get enough of me. And now? All I want is a little appreciation and what I get is trash talk. It did not used to be this way. It was never this hard. The world has changed."

"Donald, news flash: the world hasn't changed. The problem is you. Man, hardly anybody remembers the 1952 Sugar Bowl. You're not a star football player anymore. You're not the golden boy. You are never again going to get paid to let Crown Gasoline use your picture in their newspaper ads. You're just another schmuck from *Glim Burnee* who wants to drink some beers, smoke some Marlboros, play a lot of golf and talk about his glory days. Just be humble about it."

Donald shook his head in disbelief and stared at his feet. "Thanks a lot, Norman Vincent Fucking Peale. Come on. I need help here. What do I do?"

"This is help, Donald. I'm helping."

"Teddy, I'm up to my eyeballs in debt. I'm so bad off at work that I couldn't sell dollar bills for fifty cents. Kimmy would probably like to shoot me and collect

the insurance money. And here you are telling me that I'm a schmuck? *A schmuck?* That's not helping. *It's not.* You're just fucking piling on."



Ted stood and looked Donald square in the eyes. He put a hand on Donald's shoulder. "The answer to every one of your problems is simple. Just take a look in the mirror. Take a look and be honest with yourself about what you see."

"Teddy, I've heard all this before."

"When I talk to you, are you really listening? Are you? Or are you just waiting until it's your turn to say something?"

"Teddy, goddamn it, what do I *do*? Just tell me: *What do I do?* Where's the button I push to make things better? What words do I say to make the world love me again? How do I get the bill collectors off my ass? How do I get out of my rut? This is not where I planned to be at almost fifty. I'm the punch line in the cruelest fucking joke you ever saw."

"I can't tell you what to do. It's your life. But it seems like you have to make some changes. *You.* You have to make changes."

"I'm a schmuck? And I have to change? Can you please tell me what all that means? I'm struggling here."

FINIS

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