

THOMAS COBB

## BALL HAWKS

**E**ARLY MORNING, the sun just up. The grass, heavy with dew, looks, from this angle, silver in slanting light. They are already out, notes written on the backs of receipts, of deposit slips and papers headed "From the Kitchen of," left at the starter's shack. They play on year passes bought from the city. A year of unlimited play for two hundred dollars. These are men who have known what it means to be poor. From the shack to the first tee, their traces are the three sets of dark green footprints disappearing across the silvered grass.

There are always three, barring flu, catarrh, arthritis, diarrhea and visits from children. They have hit their drives and second shots. Drives at one forty, one sixty-two, one fifty-seven, second shots much the same. The shots off an odd collection of clubs, old and new. Ancient Mizunos and Northwesterns, pulled from the bargain barrel in the pro shop. Eight dollars each. Big Berthas and Bubble Burners, a couple of hundred dollars each, from assorted kids—Spokane and Pittsfield, Syracuse and Düsseldorf, sent at Christmas and birthdays. "It's a beaut, for sure, but I'd be a son of a bitch if I would spend that kind of money on a golf club."

The balls then. All three of them, still one hundred yards out. One near the center of the fairway, one fairway left, the last in the right rough, second cut. Get it on in three and roll it in for par. A DDH from Wal-Mart, \$15 for the 18-pack, an orange Top-Flite, a Slazenger fished from the water in front of the third and sixteenth. "Lookit that. Brand spank-

ing new." The logo a leaping cat. "Ain't it just the prettiest little pussy ball?" This last to be repeated until the ball is lost again, in the water or the thick rough next to five.

They keep walking, talking in the short distances of the fairway, for they are all in the fairway, speaking loudly to be heard over the silence of the early morning course. They bracket the green. They fire away from the fairways. They surround the green. "Let it happen, Captain." "Fire at will." "That one puts me in the brig for sure." They keep their backs straight and walk from their heels. They have in their day known Corregidor, Anzio and Chosin Reservoir. They have shrapnel, night sweats and government disability. They march down the fairways. Old golf shoes, Adidas walkers, crosstrainers, strapped on with Velcro. Their

---

He has dreams of  
iron and brass and  
clay, of his own  
body turning into  
brittle metal  
as he sleeps.

---

legs white and lumpy and hairless in the morning light. They are wrapped for the arthritis. Knees, ankles and wrists, backs and elbows. Ace elastic bandages and tectonic magnets in rubber wraps. A copper bracelet at the wrist.

The balls they have struck spin clockwise, counter and back to front, landing and running, rarely straight, but skidding left to right and, one, right to left, coming to rest against the tall grass of the rough and behind a white pine that blocks the way to the green. He comes up, wobbling on

his ankles (one four-year-old Foot Joy missing two spikes under the ball of the left foot). His head appears from behind the trunk of the tree, disappears, appears again. From across the fairway they sing to him, "Oh, Danny Boy, the trees, the trees they are calling."

He rummages through the bag for the club that is best for this, though he is not sure what "this" is. It is through the tree or past the tree, or before the tree. He is still tangled in dreams, as though they are thin and sticky, and he must peel them from himself. He has dreams of iron and brass and clay, of his own body turning into brittle metal as he sleeps. He is transformed by night and spends his days trying to know what it all means.

He shakes his head, fishes a wadded Kleenex from the pocket of his shorts, blows his nose and looks again. "I've seen worse," he says. Three years ago, he sat in a leather chair and squinted at the dark film. He was not sure what he was supposed to see, never having seen his own body from the inside before. "Right there." A ballpoint pen held delicately

in the fingers, not quite touching the surface of the film. "Right there at the tip of the pen." A dark spot, the size of a dime, maybe less. "That's where it is. That's what we've got to get out of there."

And there is the cutting, but that is not enough. After the cutting, the chemo, that takes his strength, his hair, his appetite. He drops forty-six pounds. Days he lies in the bed, picking at the chenille coverlet, watching the shapes quiver and move across the television set. In the sickness, the vomiting, the standing and falling, he hears the voices call out to him, "Oh, Daniel, are they able to deliver you?"

Now he disappears into the trees, hole after hole.

"Where is Danny gone?"

"Back to water the trees, again, I suspect."

He comes out of the trees, shaking his head. "One cup of coffee, good for eight pisses, now."

"Check your zipper, there, Sarge, something is liable to fall out."

He adjusts his pants and shrugs. "Dead men don't jump out of fourth-floor windows."

He takes a seven iron from the bag. A small swing, the club never raised past the hip. The ball rises up, six feet, eight, then drops twelve feet away, in the fairway, bounces, rolls, then comes to rest. Out from behind the trees he hobbles on shaky ankles, his hair coming back long and white. And he thinks maybe he will not cut it, having been delivered now, back and safe, among the rest of them. In his life, happier now, astraddle waking and dreaming.

**T**HEY CARRY WITH them the smells of the medications they have rubbed in before starting off. Ben Gay and AsperCreme, Capzazin, Aloe Vera, Pazo and Noxzema. They are also filled with Dimetapp and Metamucil, Xanax, Prozac, Cardizem, Sular, Hyzar, Provahcol, Lovostatin, Procar and Lasix. Coming out of the Nytol, Sominex, and Smirnoff, bolstered with McDonald's coffee and hash browns, Dunkin' Donuts' Bavarian Creme.

They play teams, each teaming with Jimmy who shoots always his last score, always the 93 he shot two weeks before Christmas, three, maybe it was four, years ago. Today it is Daniel and Lemuel against Samuel and Jimmy. Always for the coffee at the end of the round. One dollar

and seventy-five cents grudgingly paid for the pale coffee, greedily drunk.

**B**ETWEEN THE FOOTPRINTS, the twin lines of the pull carts – Bag Boy and homemade. The bags are old, vinyl, nylon and canvas lashed to the carts with red and yellow bungee cords, gray duct tape and yellow polypropylene cord. From the handles of the carts, bags of week-old bread for feeding the ducks and pigeons, the huge catfish, fat from eating baby ducks, coming up from the bottom like sharks, plastic grocery bags for the balls they will find in the roughs and the ponds. With their retrievers, they fish for the balls hit in since yesterday morning, Titleists, Top-Flites, Pinnacles, some nearly new. They tally up the balls as they tally up the pars and bogeys and double bogeys. “I’d sure like to find me some more of that pussy.”

“I believe Jimmy would just like you to find a game in there somewheres, old friend. If I was missing putts as bad as that, I believe I would take that new putter out of my bag and see what it can do.”

“It can miss them as bad as this one. It don’t make no difference. Titanium, Balata. It’s the putter, not the putter.”

“What do you suppose that putter put him back?”

“I can’t even stand to think. The boy knows how to spend money. I’ve never seen a soul better at it, not even his mother. Nothing more than a pot to pee in, but a gold-plated one.”

“Things are no better, then?”

“It never occurred to me that he would just ruin the whole goddamned business. Should have known. Should have, should have. Pup never missed a meal in his life because he had a bitch for a mother and a dumb mutt for a dad. I learned to be a man freezin’ my frig off and starvin’ near to death in Korea. Swore he’d never know what it meant to be hungry. Guess I got what I wanted.”

“Sometimes you got to learn whether to eat the eggs or the hen. That’s a hard lesson. He does send you nice presents, though.”

“You like this damned putter so much, you can have it.”

“No, I got troubles of my own. Keep yours in your own bag, old Sammy.”

"At least Jimmy don't ever let me down."

"Never does. Not no more."

**T**HE BAGS ARE STUFFED with balls, scrounged from the course, nearly new, once waterlogged. TopFlites and Titleists, Maxflis and Hogans, Pinnacles and KroFlites. They are orange and yellow and mostly white. They trade them by their color. "You like them punkin balls. Give me a Titleist, and I'll give you both of them." The rest of the pockets stuffed with Band-Aids and aspirin, old gloves, The Rules of Golf, 1974 edition, score cards partially filled out. Cans of Coke and Sprite. Lighters and cigarettes and in one bag a five pack of Antonio and Cleopatras. ("I smoke them out here and the old woman she doesn't know, though I don't think she could smell a sack of shit if she stepped in it any more.") A bottle of nitroglycerin tablets, Pepto-Bismol and Kaopectate. (You walk in three holes out with a pants full, you'll know what I'm talking about). Power Bars and Snickers, crackers and half an apple, dry as a wood chip.

---



---

"I learned to be a  
man freezin' my frig  
off and starvin' near  
to death in Korea.  
Swore he'd never  
know what it meant  
to be hungry.  
Guess I got what I  
wanted."

---



---

They move across the green, old putters in their hands, the grips disintegrating. From 20 feet, nine and six, they bend over the putts, heads down, and they are quiet, like women at prayer. From 20, the first spins at the cup then drops. From nine the putt holds the line and never drops but slides by eight inches. The six curves up slightly, leaving a gentle arc on the wet grass, to the cup, like the end of the rainbow.

"If you keep on putting like that, that coffee is going to taste especial good when you buy it."

"I could find another cup says Jimmy will birdie eighteen and neither of you will."

"He always does, and we never do. Must of died a happy man."

"I believe he did. I'm thinking I'm coming up on a birdie there myself."

“Nah. Come on, old sport. Buck up. You got to keep bogeying it, just like the rest of us for a while yet.”

**A**ND ON TO THE NEXT TEE, a quick stop in the woods to lose the last cup of coffee and look for balls. Deep in, through the briars and under the brush, a Pinnacle Gold, slightly discolored on one side. “God must of hit that one in when He was just a tot.” Around the tee box, the gleaming of the tees, tossing away the broken with a quick back flip of the wrist, the two good ones gathered in and deep in the pocket. “When I run out of tees, I quit the game.”

The numbers rise, hole by hole, the card weighted with them. It will be pored over, nudged and adjusted, each number the beginning of a story. Then it will be tucked away in a glove compartment or in the pocket of a coat or in the drawer of an ancient desk. But the numbers are the numbers. Neither the totals of desire or deceit, but the numbers, given, solemn, among the joking. “It looks like Jimmy is the best player on your team again, Sammy.”

“That’s because Jimmy doesn’t ever have to pay for the coffee. Six,” he says, shaking his head as if to erase this number. And a hand on the other’s shoulder. “The wife, Lem. How is the wife?”

“Yesterday, pretty good. Today, who knows?” When he has hit the last ball, given his score, drunk the coffee it seems certain he will pay for, offered to buy more, he will get behind the wheel of his seven-year-old Buick and drive to where his wife is, *La Casa en los Sombres*, the House in the Shadows, and woo her again, as he has for several years. He will woo her to eat, to fix her eyes on some point he might find in the small room, where the others pass in and out, to know it is him and, still, her. He holds in his hand that which is more precious, tracing with his finger the lines in her hand he has held for forty-six years. He looks at the eyes, which roam where he cannot see or go, and he cannot hold them or stop their endless roll and wobble. He blots the saliva from the mouth he has kissed more times than he can remember.

In her hands he can trace his life. What esteem he has, she has made with these hands that move idly now, lost in her lap, anchored in his fingers. And this is his anchor, too. Released from her hands, he drifts into his day, cooking poor meals he can barely eat, wouldn’t like if he could, cleaning the house that rings as hollow as brass, but has been paid for for more than ten years, reading what means nothing to him and listening to the quiet babble of the television in the back ground.

And when her eyes finally catch on his, she swims back from the gates of memory, and she holds him there. She speaks with the kind tongue of the law, smiling at his shining head. "Lemmy, You have grown so old." And he ages as she retreats, only their hands holding them together as time disjoints and separates.

He brings the driver down in a smooth arc, sending the ball spinning into the long grass of the rough on the right. "What one won't kill you," Daniel offers. Lem hoists his regret. "I just can't finish. I don't know why I can't, but I just can't finish. I just can't get that damn thing to go into that little hole there."

"That's because putting isn't golf."

"If putting ain't golf, just what is it?"

"Croquet."

They move through the fairways laterally, going from rough to rough, their tracks fading in the sunlight. Their shots arc up, under-hit, fat and thin, club faces open and shut, spinning counter and clockwise, waterlogged and bouncing and running off at odd angles. They end up mostly in the fairway. They bag their clubs and swear. They bogey and double bogey and par. They fish the balls others have lost, tee them up, and hit, watching them wobble and spin in the now unfamiliar air. They limp after them, turning luminous in morning sun.