

FAIRWAY FOURPLAY – An Irish Golf Expedition

PRELUDE

For almost a half century golf has been part of my daily life. Whether through play, practice, teaching, conversation, viewing, or writing, I have been shaped by the greatest game of all. I learned to play at an early age thanks to my parents, Bill and Ruthie. Their blessings, patience, and encouragement were invaluable. I've met wonderful folks on courses around the country, many I remember fondly plus a few who have become my closest friends. Certainly I've learned more from golf than any other avenue. It teaches wonderful lessons and for brief moments, grants the soul a fulfilling sense of accomplishment.

Growing up in Decatur, Illinois during the 1960's, I teed it with other kids my age, talented players in their own right. Often a day would consist of 36 holes and perhaps a dip in the pool to cool down. If the course rules prohibited us from playing, we'd organize matches on the putting green that went on for hours, especially if you were down a bunch of quarters. We enjoyed spirited competition but ultimately benefitted from developing friendships that have endured forty-plus years.

These writings evolve from those life long relationships based upon the travel adventures of four golfers who truly love the game and celebrate its traditions. My great friend RB and I decided to once again traverse the pond, taking our games to Northern Ireland. We grew up playing as much golf as possible, emulating Arnold Palmer as well as other tour stars while banging heads against each another in local junior tournaments. I'm sure he'd agree there is no one else he'd rather beat than me. The feeling is mutual. We've shared so much together through golf, picked on each other mercilessly while experiencing many of the finer things the game offers. Without such a close friend and willing competitor, my life would not be as rich.

Another veteran of the Soybean Capital of the World, a few years our junior, Doug may have been the finest player to grow up in Decatur. He played on the University of Illinois golf team, compiled a wonderful amateur career and is one of those special individuals who understand how life and golf are one in the same. Regardless if he's playing in competition or just out freewheeling it with his buddies, Doug enjoys all aspects of the game. That's because he contributes so much to the experience of others who are lucky enough to accompany him around the course. Don't let your guard down though. His quick, dry wit is capable of turning a scratch player into a 24 handicapper.

John (JJ) has been my close friend on and off the course for thirty-plus years. He was one of the first people I met on the Furman University golf course as I ditched my books and grabbed the clubs one Saturday afternoon. It just so happened his father presided over the school as president. Becoming a friend of the family is one of the luckier occurrences I've stumbled upon. His mom, dad, wife and kids epitomize the ideal of southern hospitality. JJ is a fine student of the game and can be one of those obnoxious sorts who never ventures far from the fairway. He is an absolute walking sports encyclopedia. His stories have at times caused me to cry from laughing so hard. I

figured with RB and Doug in tow, JJ would thoroughly enjoy his jaunt to Ireland. I am so lucky to have this itinerary include three outstanding gentlemen and terrific friends.

Finally, there is me - Haigs. All I can say is that if golf had not found me I might have been left at the starting gate. Earning a Philosophy degree from Furman University taught me to “take it deep” at times. My perspective is 720 degrees, twice the scope of most folks. Perhaps it’s because I fear I might miss something. I often see what the common fellow misses. Some people kick all four tires on a car; I’ll kick each one four times. There is so much to experience within the game besides playing. Players come from various backgrounds -- hobos to CEO’s. The diversity of venues and the evolution of equipment are mindboggling. All comprise the unique world I’ve wandered since early childhood. Golf is by far the greatest game and perhaps the greatest teacher of all.

Touring Scotland seven years prior to this trip offered a glimpse of how the game can be played on less-than-ideal turf conditions with the elements testing one’s resolve. Not knowing what to expect, I jumped in with both feet our first day in Edinburgh. We (RB, Doug, Tater (another Decatur-ite -- JJ didn’t make this trip), teed it up on the Glen Course in North Berwick for a warm up eighteen. After flying all night then feasting on breakfast Heinekens after our arrival in Amsterdam we needed some fresh Scottish air. Throwing carry bags on our backs, the foursome traversed a playful layout offering a chance to stretch our jet-lagged bodies. The elements were unlike those back home. Firm turf, quirky weather, strategic bunkering, all on a course measuring 6400 yards; even so it put our egos in check. It didn’t take long to embrace this style of play.

After the week in Scotland I wanted to go back. Those conditions got in my blood. The choice between Ireland and Scotland called for a thorough investigation. Although Tater wouldn’t be making the trip, he recommended Ireland. Jim, another close friend and head golf professional at a Chicago area club also voted for Ireland. I wanted to explore the upper highlands of Scotland – Royal Dornoch, the home of Donald Ross as well as Cruden Bay, Nairn, Tain, and Brora. RB and Doug didn’t care. They were committed. Direct flights ended up being the deciding factor. We could get to Dublin or Glasgow from each of our departing cities. So all of us agreed; we’d take our games to Ireland for a week of memorable golf.

What a week it was.

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ERIN

I never considered turning fifty a special accomplishment. Although I hoped some day I’d achieve the age, it wasn’t a pressing concern. To me, simpler matters such as staying

alive no matter how old I was seemed more important. Regardless, once arriving at the number, only a few things changed from my late forties. Aches and pains crept through my joints in a random procession. My eyes, well, all I can say is they just don't seem to work as well as they did before. At times the old waistline presents wardrobe challenges perhaps due to the fact my mouth opens more often in the presence of food. Now there's a million dollar idea for a new diet – simply keep your mouth shut. Whatever the differences upon attaining fifty, life, time, and my contented nature continued on.

To some folks, achieving this magical number is cause for massive celebrations combined with foolish rites of gift giving. Naturally, my wife Sandy arranged a party for the occasion. I received my fair share of jokes plus off-the-wall comments from my so-called friends. The theme of the evening revolved around my cheerleading days at an all-male boarding high school. My idiot friends wanted me to lead cheers asking if I wore a skirt and did my hair the night before “the big game”. All in fun I gathered. A worthy jab from time to time is beneficial. It provides fuel for future banter. Yet I knew in the back of my mind there had to be a way to leverage this coming of age thing into a major coup. It had been seven years since my adventure to Scotland with three of my best golf buddies. Maybe, just maybe, I could sell this. It certainly was worth a try.

Actually I had to sell it. RB and I already decided a venture to either Ireland or Scotland would be appropriate since the two of us were turning fifty. I totally agreed but in the back of my mind I wondered if such a scheme would “Play in Peoria”. It might not play, but I convinced myself it was getting on stage. Despite the fact I'd have knives, lamps, my dirty underwear and the “you only think of yourself comments” tossed at me by my loving wife, throwing myself in harms way was inevitable. We were going.

I knew what to say to Sandy. I just had to pick the appropriate moment in order to incur the least damage. They say timing IS everything. First, RB and I sent an e-mail to Doug. Without hesitation he was in. Our fourth from the Scottish excursion, the inimitable Tater, was doubtful. No problem I figured. My good friend JJ would be the perfect choice. He loved special occasions – the Masters, Florida football and UNC basketball. I remember him asking if I ever went back to the UK to let him know. I did and he ate it up. Of course he put himself in same boat I did – we had to tell our wives. The foursome was assembled. It would help with my story that I was at least traveling with three other adults of reputable character. Heck, I knew in the back of my mind I was going to take heavy spousal flack. Screw timing, it just wasn't going to matter. The debit side of the equation would heavily outweigh whatever credit I'd accumulated for recommending such a trip.

Preparations for our trip continued even though the moment I was searching for to address my other half had not yet surfaced. Finally, I just blurted out we were going to Ireland. After the mushroom cloud dissipated, I managed to remain in the house. Conversation the next few days featured short Q&A sessions. It took a few weeks but eventually we were able to move past my selfish decision.

The memories of coordinating the Scottish adventure seven years before came to the forefront. Preparing the itinerary was almost as much fun as taking the trip. Planning a week of golf in a land three thousand miles away seemed absurd. Yet we made it work in Scotland. Now Ireland would have to put up with us. I began the search with airfares from Green Bay, Milwaukee, Chicago and Appleton just in case a strange quirk in pricing occurred. How could one not live without the internet? For the next few months it would frustrate and captivate, get lambasted, and ultimately praised for stumbling upon a reasonable fare out of Chicago. Good, that meant I could get in another practice round stateside before landing in Dublin. Things started coming together.

Naturally RB would coordinate the golf rota while I pursued lodging options. It was pretty much agreed upon that Royal County Down Golf Club would have to be played no matter what type of charade we might conjure to invade its turf. I dove in first with an e-mail to the club secretary requesting TWO tee times. The fact we'd be visiting a week after the Walker Cup matches didn't faze me. We wanted to play what some considered the finest course in the world. I awaited the Secretary's reply, feeling the pressure to deliver good news.

Reply times in Northern Ireland differ from those in the states. I expected to hear from RCD the following day. It took five. Nonetheless, I did receive a reply. The club secretary indicated my request was immediately following the 2007 Walker Cup matches. Times would be tight. Big deal, I thought, we're only talking two tee times. I later discovered September is their busiest month for guest play. The mounting headwind made me all the more determined to get this done. After a few more e-mails, two letters of verification from RB and me plus a phone call, we had secured two tee times – one on Tuesday and one on Thursday. Great! Now how would we route the trip to take advantage of these privileged times?

While I battled to secure the times at RCD, RB had already talked with Royal Portrush, Portstewart, Castlerock and Royal Dublin. The wheels were turning and naturally Doug was absent from the planning stages. Chalk that up to Doug's unique insight regarding the planning abilities of RB. He needn't get in the way. He also knew whatever RB came up with would be more than adequate. Doug realized he didn't possess the same smooth-talking repertoire our friend would have on the Irish professionals. True to form RB managed to get comps for him and me plus decent greens fees for JJ and Doug. The foursome would split all the greens fees, an equitable solution to keep costs in check. With lodging this foursome wasn't looking for a five-star experience, in other words, five-star expense. Instead the monies should be paid to play the best courses we could reasonably access since we we're also doing the driving.

Accommodations would be adequate, not lavish. This was a GOLF trip, not a couples holiday to the Irish countryside. RB and I finally agreed on his initial routing. As a result we relinquished one of our times at RCD. This would later prove to be a good thing.

So it was happening. May had arrived. The trip was a go and now the summer merely had to pass without any disasters. Come September we'd meet in Dublin and start our journey over seven celebrated days. The anticipation began to build.

O'HARE

For some reason the enthusiasm that engulfed me prior to boarding the plane for Edinburgh seven years earlier had not taken a hold this time. Perhaps it resulted from my office audit the day before. Whatever it was, O'Hare's international terminal felt crowded and sterile. Naturally my flight was delayed two hours. The feeling of whether or not I should be going briefly entered my mind. With the newly announced delay, I had to get out of the terminal. The idea of waiting three hours to board Aer Lingus in cramped quarters didn't make it. A sports bar with televised coverage of the Tour Championship would be just the tonic. Jumping on the airport tram, I opted for the Hilton. After a hearty jaunt about the property I came across a crowded, smoky and somewhat suspect watering hole. Nope, this wasn't my idea of a relaxing way to pass the time. With three hours before takeoff, I discovered a quiet spot in a cushy chair on the mezzanine level of the hotel. Taking pen in hand I'd catch up on transcribing my golf adventure to Ireland.

Doug hit it on the head once again. A few weeks back he guessed we would all be scrambling with the start of school as well as other changes in life that occur after Labor Day. This trip might catch us off guard. It did big time. For me something just felt undone. I can't explain what it was. Hopefully it would fade away. At least the delay allowed me to arrive in Dublin at 8:00 am rather than 6:00 am. Doug was supposed to be the last one on Irish turf, a little after 9:00 am. As a result the wait in Dublin's airport would be brief. Relax Haigs, I told myself -- you're on vacation.

What compels four grown men to fly halfway around the world to play golf in cold, wind and rain? Perhaps because they seek challenge? Maybe they want to measure their skills against the unparalleled challenge of links golf. Nope. It's because they are all married with kids. Wind, cold and rain are far more appealing than our wives constantly asking us if we remembered to take out the garbage. Actually age did have something to do with it. Now that RB and I survived fifty what else was there? Sex???? Sex is for losers I kept trying to convince myself. How many guys can sting a two iron fifteen feet off the ground then curl it into a left flagstick? Well, OK I couldn't do that very often but I felt my chances would be a bit more substantiated than the sex thing. Truthfully, we simply wanted to go to a place in order to play links golf – hard, fast, windy, rainy links golf. Most likely it would be our final chance.

The minutes clicked by as I recorded a few thoughts in my notebook. Down the hall a meeting room dispensed it's bored-looking attendees. The Mexican tear-down-the-meeting-room team jumped into action. I watched as most of the shirt and tie clad professionals made their way to the nasty bar on the lower level. After all it was Friday afternoon. They'd have a couple of cocktails, say their goodbyes and head off to gates ushering them to Dayton, Grand Rapids, Omaha, and some Springfield, pick the applicable state. Linens flew out of the meeting room, tables rolled down the hall, water pitchers clanked together and the chit-chat Spanish discourse faded as the room was readied to receive its next victims. Watching in amusement at the diversity of the players in this performance, I thanked God I wasn't included.

An hour passed. Should I make my way back to a place resembling Ellis Island? Nah; I sat a few more minutes with my head back, eyes shut imagining how Ireland might look. Tired? Perhaps a bit. I'd left Green Bay at 5:00 am in order to get to Skokie CC and meet my nephew Matt for a 7:30 am tee time. The way I'd been flogging it I needed some work. Plus the long day would help me sleep on the plane going over. Getting up in the dark wasn't all that bad as long as I kept the prize in sight. Besides, I'd leave my car at Matt's place and he'd shuttle me back and forth from O'Hare. All I had to do was get his rabid golfing ass on any club where the greens stimped above six.

RB will tell you Skokie CC is one of the best courses you'll ever play. It truly is. He should know after serving as an assistant professional there for four years. The 1922 US Open venue where Gene Sarazen took the trophy from the likes of Hagen and Jones, this Donald Ross layout is challenging but fair. As usual I started out well but hit one of my off the world drives on the fifth hole and from there I chalked up the round to enjoying the variety of this great parkland layout. The greens rolled quickly while the fairways, although a bit wet from dew, resembled emerald carpet. Regardless of the number of "others" I put on the card, it didn't matter. Playing a shrine is never a chore once your ego is in check.

After the round we went in to thank Robert, Skokie's long-time head professional. He and Matt hit it off. Robert told Matt to call him if he wanted to come out again. I figured that kind of deal should guarantee an infinite number of rides to O'Hare. We said goodbye, Matt having to get home and check on his daughter while I hopped into the showers. There is nothing like a shower in a locker room at a Chicago North Shore Country Club. Most of them can blow a hole through your chest. With an infinite amount of towels and grooming aides I knew I'd be under par walking out of the clubhouse. Later I met Matt, his wife Jelana, and their daughter Ana, at their condo on the near north side. Matt proceeded to take me through his most impressive collection of golf equipment while instructing me to pick up some logoed Pro V1's from the courses we were visiting. On the way to O'Hare I checked my inventory to make sure I had everything. In twelve hours I'd be standing in Dublin's airport waiting for the other three amigos. The temp in Chicago registered a sunny 77 degrees. It would not be that way in Ireland.

Sitting in the Hilton writing down a few final thoughts, the time had come. I rose from my chair, packed the memo pad in my carry-on and jumped on the tram to the international terminal. Ten minutes later I stood amongst a throng of people speaking different languages. There were no incidents going through security. Immediately I was confronted with the Duty Free Shop. Why not I figured?

Now I can see if someone is dangerously low on his or her alcoholic beverage supply, cigarettes, or perfume this place might be of use. Not spying any Pro V1's for \$12.99/dozen, I made my way to the exit. Meandering down to the Aer Lingus gate a group of men dressed in khakis and golf shirts adorned with the occasional sweater vest or windshirt attracted my attention. One fella's particular imitation of a proper backswing garnered a few laughs. I could tell they were well lubricated for the flight. Surely they would enjoy each other's antics in Ireland. In eight hours I'd meet my friends and we would begin our adventure, perhaps engaging in the same silliness. It was only an ocean away.

As a kid, I loved airplanes, dreaming of becoming a pilot someday. I actually went to one lesson of ground school. That must have done the trick – I've been grounded ever since. So my nature and curiosity to catch a glimpse of the plane was understandable. The adjacent gate had a few passengers filtering around the aisles looking out at the tarmac. You could see the Airbus being prepped for flight. Next to me stood a slim, middle aged, dark haired man with his young son. He propped the boy up, placing his small feet on the windowsill pointing out the different parts of the plane. I thought back to when my boys were younger and we had flown to Orlando for the first time. They didn't know what to expect. Poor Ryan's ears popped along the way. Ben just smiled with that look on his face. You know the one where kids think something is so totally cool they don't know what to say? That's the look a parent rarely sees, but loves. Who knows, maybe this was the lad's first time on a plane. If that were true it would be a tough test -- an eight-hour endurance ride to Dublin.

The gate agent moved to her post. In the sweetest Irish accent you have ever heard she announced the boarding plan for our flight. My seat happened to be in the rear of the plane, apparently a good thing according to the ticket agent. I waltzed down the jetway, entering the Airbus and making my way towards the rear. The gangsome of avid golfers fortunately were seated near the middle of the plane. Good, I might be able to get some rest. These guys might drink themselves to sleep after their loud renditions of various golf accomplishments. The back of the "bus" narrowed with the middle seating section containing three possibilities. My aisle seat did not appear to be akin to a Lazy-Boy but having the middle seat open offered a bit of additional space. A young lady, maybe thirty-ish, with brownish-blond hair dusting her slight shoulders sat in the opposite aisle seat. She settled in for the long flight. I caught a glimpse of a tattoo pasted on her lower back. Maybe I'm old fashioned but my idea of a beautiful female body is one with natural features rather than pictures or zodiac impressions. I took my seat, placing my carry on beneath the forward row. This is it, I thought. I'm going to Ireland but the excitement once again eluded me. Traveling to Scotland the last time I had Tater to chat with but now I sat alone, isolated from a friendly ear that might listen to my ramblings.

“Tatoo” didn’t offer conversation so my hours in the air would be spent reading, sleeping, plus sucking down enough water to stay hydrated.

It was time to fumble for the seatbelt and strap in. As usual I grabbed the info card in order to educate myself with the plane. This would be my first flight on an Airbus. My preferences were for Boeing aircraft but that wasn’t apparently the preference of Aer Lingus. While examining the card, the plane jerked as it backed away from the gate commencing its search for one of O’Hare’s runways. The sun slid down the autumn sky as flight attendants waltzed up and down the aisles checking seatback positions. We took our position among other planes, probably Boeings, waiting our turn as the rumblings of activity grew steadily louder. Finally we swung into position and the Airbus lurched forward. As the engines roared the plane hurtled down the runway. Either I hadn’t flown for a while or these Airbuses were extremely loud because the noise of the engines had me cautiously aware of the take off. I’ve always resigned myself to the fact that pilots don’t want to crash their plane; therefore I’d be OK. As the plane jumped into the remaining bit of daylight I heard the wheels retract as the pilot cut back a bit on the engines. We were airborne. Airborne and heading to a place I’d never been. A place where I’d be with three of my best buds playing some wonderful courses. Finally, the adrenaline began to flow.

ARRIVAL

For the next few hours I read, dozed, ate dinner and attempted to visualize how Dublin might appear. One thing about the stewards at Aer Lingus, they serve more tea than you can imagine. After awhile I felt guilty not taking them up on their offer, deciding to have a cup. All you could hear throughout the cabin were their sweet voices, “Tea, tea, more tea, tea, more tea?” Amused by this ritual, it reminded me I would be entering a country of different customs. Hopefully the locals would be just as accommodating with the Irish whiskey and Guinness. With the tea service completed, I grabbed a blanket attempting to mold my body into a comfortable position allowing a few hours of rest. My bunkmate already managed to conk out in the subdued light. I shut my eyes dozing off to the steady drone of the engines.

The clattering of meal service carts served as my morning alarm. The tea chorus once again gained momentum. By the time I received my breakfast the sleepiness drifted from my eyes. Within a couple of hours we’d be on the ground in Dublin. Chomping the items on a plastic plate and sipping another cup of tea, this passenger was anxious to get on the ground. A video news feature played on the monitors. Sleeping beauty awakened and I nodded to her. No response. Perhaps looking forward to returning home. She gestured to the attendant for more tea. Picking at her assortment of breakfast items she appeared to be getting her act together for arrival. The dawn’s light filtered through the cabin announcing Saturday morning had arrived in another part of the world. Today would be full length but with an adrenaline kick I figured I’d make it through the marathon. This wouldn’t be like our Scottish adventure where we hit the ground in

Amsterdam with pints of Heineken for breakfast. We'd be ready to drive north to Portrush as soon as possible in order to settle in, and perhaps play a few holes.

The Airbus made its approach to Dublin, bumping through the cloud layers as it descended. Sitting in the middle section I could only catch a glimpse of what others were viewing outside their small portals. I did see green so the "Emerald Isle" catch phrase appeared true to form. The pilot skillfully set the plane down, reverse thrust the huge Rolls Royce engines, grabbing my attention once again. I was awake. I was in Ireland. The trip was now officially underway.

It's interesting flying into an international airport and observing the diversity. Travelers adorned in different attire are always great eye candy. I walked briskly through an old hallway with poor lighting and peeling paint, herded by printed directional signs towards an array of customs officers. They sat in wooden booths with narrow walkways heading to a door of freedom. Waiting in line for my turn, I was eventually summoned by a dour gentleman with thinning grey hair and suspect teeth. I handed him my passport plus a declaration sheet of some type. He peered at my papers through wire-rimmed glasses carefully. Noticing I was not a frequent foreign traveler, he asked the nature of my visit. I replied I was on a golf vacation. He shrugged, stamped my passport and handed me my documents, managing a muffled "njoy yer vsit".

That was easier than I thought it might be. Naturally I wasn't trying to smuggle any illegal Pro V1's, but in these days of international air travel you never know what might upset customs officials. I proceeded to a series of doors assuming they would take me to the baggage claim area. Rather than read the signs I opted to follow the flow. These folks had to be searching for the same thing. Checking my watch, the delay seemed to work to my advantage. RB should be on the ground by now as long as he got out of New York without complications. Shuffling towards the Aer Lingus bag claim I felt giddy arriving safely in Dublin, Ireland. Looking to verify the correct location of my bags, glancing over my shoulder, there was the sensation of a presence. Naturally, it was RB.

Smiles shot across our faces.

"Welcome to Ireland," he smirked.

"Yeah, no kidding. Welcome to Ireland," I replied.

We both laughed as if we'd busted out of Alcatraz.

"That delay of mine worked out perfect, RB. I wasn't too thrilled about sitting around waiting here for three hours."

My clubs popped out of the bag claim turnstyle. As they got closer, I snagged them.

"Haigs, grab your stuff and meet me over there," RB said as he pointed towards the door.

I waited for my suitcase hoping Aer Lingus would complete their part of the deal. Most travelers tend to agree you don't want the carousel to stop moving without your bag on it. It's like watching a horse race although you don't really care if you win; you just want your "horse" to show. So far my horse hadn't gotten out of the paddock. At least my

clubs made it. Finally my new Ogio bag spun out of the turn and headed towards me. Mission complete – both my clubs and a weeks' attire delivered.

Weaving my way through a crowd of travelers I arrived at RB's locale. His baggage sat randomly stacked on a pushcart.

"You may want to grab one of these," he instructed.

"How much?" I asked.

"Nothin', they're free. Go grab one."

I spied the carts across the room.

"OK, I'll be right back. You're sure they're free?" I inquired again, not knowing whether to believe him. After all, the trip had officially started. I wasn't going to let my guard down with RB.

"Yeah, get one."

Trying to do my best impression of a veteran world traveler, I ambled towards the baggage carts seizing one as if it were a life preserver in a churning tide. RB was right. The carts were free unlike back in the states.

"JJ's coming in next isn't he?" RB queried.

"Should be on US Air from Philly." I said. "He'll be clueless."

JJ knew his way around a few venues, although I doubt he'd ever been in the Dublin airport. This wasn't Augusta National, Florida Field or the Dean Dome. I gathered JJ would hit the ground, follow the masses and we'd find him without much difficulty. As we waited RB and I chatted about the flight, the rota, the weather, what we'd brought to battle it, plus other topics.

"He's a good player, isn't he?" RB asked.

"Yeah, JJ can play," I replied. "He usually hits it pretty straight, not real long but consistent. You'll get a kick out of him. He'll be a perfect fourth."

It must be an unwritten law – if you talk about someone, they will immediately appear. Naturally JJ came walking towards us with his usual greeting.

"Hello guvna," he said with his typical imitated British accent.

"Welcome to Ireland!" we both replied.

"My stuff is coming out now so I wanted to see if I could locate ya'll before lugging this crap around."

JJ deposited his carry-on with us and headed back to claim his bags. In a few minutes he returned loading his stuff on our two carts. Now we really looked like tourists.

"How was the flight?"

"Not bad, getting to Philly was a pain but coming across was fine. It was pretty warm when I left. Doubt if we'll get that over here," JJ pondered.

"I'm gonna go check the rental car deal," RB announced. "When does Doug get in?"

"I think its another hour before he shows," I guessed. "JJ, you hungry?"

"Yes sir. Let's grab a little sustenance."

The three of us worked our way through the terminal, RB looking for our transportation, JJ looking for food, me just looking. Shortly after downing a bagel and locating our rental car pick up, Doug arrived. The foursome now joined forces. We wheeled our belongings across the street to the rental car location. This proved to be our first challenge.

Cars in Europe are generally smaller than in the states. Even the minivans are mini-er. Trying to stuff clubs and suitcases in one looked impossible. RB took charge as he went through the inventory of vans with little luck. Suddenly nature grabbed my attention from the backside forcing me to make my way to the terminal before soiling myself. Exiting the men's room, Doug grabbed my arm.

"C'mon," he said, "We got it all in."

"No way," I objected.

"Come see for yourself," Doug instructed.

Outside the terminal sat a Renault minivan with RB behind the wheel. JJ occupied the back seat. Stuffed behind them in a masterful way was all our gear plus room for Doug and me. Regardless of the suitcase stuffed between Doug and JJ it proved to be an accommodating vehicle. Once we made it to Portrush we'd be able to get all this garbage out, increasing the comfort factor.

"How did you guys get all this stuff in?"

"Haigs, all your clubs are broken but they ARE inside the vehicle," RB announced.

"No worries, I'll just hit a few short punch shots," I replied.

So the trip began with some light-hearted foolery. The next thing I knew we successfully navigated a roundabout motoring north on Ireland's A1 motorway.

The thing that amazed me right away was the "modernness" of Ireland versus Scotland. Dublin, at least the area near the airport, seemed more refined, more Americanized, with high-rise hotels, convenience stores and new office buildings. As we drove up the A1 it felt much like any of our interstate roads back home. The terrain rolled gently and yes, it was a lush green – just as they claim. I didn't know what to think. I've always been one to over-analyze how small the world is, how do heavy aircraft actually fly, and how lucky we are to travel. Today everything was new. I confess I actually prefer traveling to previous venues because of the comfort in knowing the "lay of the land". Yet I also knew nothing major on this trip would happen, at least I hoped not. If it did we had four pretty smart guys to figure things out. I rode shotgun with RB at the wheel attempting to manage the shifting procedure for our van. It was a bit tight but Doug and JJ fit neatly in the back seat surrounded by our equipment. We had no idea how long it would be to Portrush but we did know we'd be crossing into Northern Ireland. Hopefully the past conflicts between the two countries would not involve four golfers from the states.

"I guess this things shifts without a clutch," RB muttered.

“Do you even have to shift it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” RB pondered, “Maybe its just automatic or something.”

“Maybe you’re an idiot,” Doug offered.

“You wanna drive?” RB raised his voice

“Only with my eyes closed,” Doug responded. “But you seem capable.”

Actually the only other designated driver was me. I wanted to watch for a few kilometers so my brain could get turned around. Driving on the left side of the road offered a serious challenge. RB looked like he enjoyed the driving while I scanned the map as navigator. Eventually the main highway would merge into a two-lane road about half way to Portrush. Tracking route numbers through the roundabouts we managed to stay on course.

Spotty sunshine eventually gave way to a rain shower. At least the windshield wipers worked. More intermittent showers greeted us as we closed in on our destination.

“I hope this quits by the time we get to Portrush,” I wished.

“It doesn’t matter. We’re gonna play anyway,” announced RB.

“That’s true. Might as well check out the rainsuit. I bought some of those FJ raingloves too,” I replied.

“Those are supposed to work pretty good,” JJ said.

“Hope so. I’ve got all the equipment but I don’t know about the game,” I countered.

“Looking good is key. Gotta have the right gear,” RB asserted.

“How’s your game RB?” Doug prodded.

I knew where this inquiry was going -- gas on the fire.

“Let’s just say I’ll be able to handle the courses and conditions,” RB stated with confidence.

“Putting OK?” Doug instigated.

“It’s fine,” RB replied. “You’ll see.”

“How bout that old driver? Still giving it the lash?” Doug kept going.

“Shut up Doug!” RB bellowed.

“What about those wedges?” Doug fired another shot across the bow.

RB sat there focused on the road, refusing to take the bait. I looked back at JJ rolling my eyes.

“Be prepared JJ, this is how it gets,” I laughed.

“Should be a fun week then,” JJ responded with his toothy smile.

As the rain subsided a few indications we were approaching Portrush appeared. The small bungalows dotting the sides of the road became more abundant. Making our way through the roundabout outside of Coleraine in County Derry, we only had about 20 kilometers to our final destination.

“Making really good time, RB,” I said.

“Yeah, the roads aren’t that bad are they?” RB countered,
“I thought it was gonna take us like five or six hours. We’ve definitely got time to get some golf in. It’s not raining that bad now,” I observed.
“How do we find this place, Haigs?” the chauffeur asked.
“I’ve got no idea. I was just going to try and do a visual,” I replied as I examined the internet printout of our B&B.

We approached the southern outskirts of Portrush.

“This is it, boys. I think we’ve arrived,” RB announced. “Where are we going Haigs?”
“Go straight into town,” I instructed. “We’ll figure it out.”
“Ho do you feel about this John?” Doug instigated. “We ought to find the place by tomorrow morning.”

JJ laughed while Doug proceeded to offer no help, which was his strong point. We made our way up Eglinton Street, a narrow one-way road lined by row houses, businesses and a few storefronts. I kept my eyes open for any recognizable features. That was absurd because I had never been in Portrush before. Glancing at my papers I did happen to recognize the harbor. The inn had to be close.

“What’s the name of the place?” JJ asked.
“Beulah Guest House,” RB and I announced
“Never been there,” JJ kidded.

We drove through the loop of the town, took a few turns down narrow side streets and eventually found our way back to Eglinton Street, the main road into town.

“OK guys, its gotta be in there somewhere,” I guessed.

RB attempted another loop through the seaside village now totally comfortable with his driving skills.

“We have to ask somebody,” RB countered.
“Stop RB, there’s a guy,” I said.

I hopped out of the van and caught a spry man wearing a baseball cap coming out of another B&B located across from the harbor.

“Excuse me sir,” I started, “Can you tell me how to find the Bealuh Guest House?”
“O’ yea,” he replied, “Yer lookin’ for Jimmie and Rachael’s place, are ye? F’low me, I’m headin’ tha way.”
“Great, I appreciate it.”
“Ya here ta play golf, looks like,” he responded.
“Yes,” I said. “We wanted to come see some REAL courses.”
Y’ll fine ‘em ere.”

I jumped back in the van.

“What did he say?” RB asked anxiously.

“Follow that guy. He’ll take us right there.” I instructed.

In five minutes we stood outside the entrance to Jimmie and Rachael’s B&B – the Beulah Guest House. Causeway Street, a narrow ribbon of asphalt cutting through the east side of Portrush offered a way south out of town. Cars were parked along its shoulders while the tight, two-lane traffic whisked by. I wondered if we’d have to find a spot along the street each evening or park the van blocks away.

Situated atop a flight of stairs stood the four-floor guest house with elongated bay windows framing its recessed entryway. Directly across the street sat an Italian restaurant plus a pub. Metal storm shutters covered many of the business windows, perhaps remnants from the days of unrest. To me it looked a bit intimidating but it was a part of Portrush, a part of the history of Northern Ireland.

I climbed the stairs after negotiating my way across the road and rang the door bell. Within minutes a woman in her late fifties with a pleasant smile, warm eyes, and wispy brown hair greeted me.

“You must be Rachael,” I inquired.

“N’ ye mus b’ Mark,” she replied with her pleasant accent. “Dijya ‘ave a nice trip?”

“Actually we arrived pretty much on time. We’re surprised we made it up here so quickly,” I added.

I waved at the three amigos across the street to come over and meet Rachael. As I stood in the narrow entry hall waiting for RB, Doug and JJ, Rachael told me a few things about their establishment. Down the hall I could see her kitchen. The cozy foyer featured an antique bureau displaying business cards plus brochures. Immediately to the right was an open doorway to a breakfast room with six assorted tables. A narrow red-carpeted staircase led to rooms on the upper floors. Negotiating suitcases and clubs up the stairs might present a challenge but if we took our time, we could figure it out.

“Rachael,” I announced, “this is RB, Doug and John. Hopefully they won’t cause too much trouble.”

“Welcome,” she said, “I hope ye njoy yer stay.”

“Rachael, do you think it might rain this week?” Doug asked using a tone of voice akin to a naive kindergartener on their first day of school.

RB and I knew this act. He was fishing for a reaction.

“M’be just a wee bit, but ye look hearty ‘nough ta survive,” she responded.

Right then we figured Rachael could handle her own.

“Rat’er tha’ bring yer luggage ‘cross the road we’ve a car park oot back,” she announced.

She described the route to access the car park. Of course we got lost. After ten minutes we navigated the van through a narrow driveway to the back of the B&B. Rachael greeted us at the back door as we brought in our belongings and golf clubs. She proceeded to hand out four room keys instructing us to leave them with her when we left the premises.

The rooms were small but each had its own bathroom plus the proper utensils for making a cup of tea. My only window looked out on a collection of white painted brick row houses. It offered everything needed for storing my gear. The firm double bed wasn't quite what I expected but it did allow plenty of room to spread out. Stowed on a shelf sat an extra blanket. There was even a TV. As long as I liked BBC 1 or BBC 2 it was all good.

I grabbed a few things out of my suitcase. Within a minute or two RB arrived at the open doorway.

"How about a walk? Grab some lunch?" he asked enthusiastically.

"Agreed, let's check this place out. Where's JJ and Doug?" I asked.

We wandered downstairs to find the others.

"Not bad is it?" I asked looking for a little credit.

"This is great," JJ responded, "It's cozy plus I like having my own shower."

"I think this will suffice for a few days," Doug added. "Rachael is a sweetheart."

"Well, I guess we're staying then, huh?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

The four of us rambled down another narrow flight of stairs. We found Rachael in the hallway.

"Where's a good place for lunch?" RB asked.

"Doon tha' way a place on ta w'ter, 55 North its called."

"Sounds like a good plan. We can walk there?" RB wondered.

"Surely ye can," Rachael responded. "A brisk walk will d'ye good. By tha way, what time wood ye like yer breakfast tomorrow?"

We looked cluelessly at each trying to recall our tee time at Ballyliffin.

"How long will it take to get to Ballyliffin, Rachael?"

"Oh my, I'd say it be, well le's see. Ye'll have ta take ta ferry. Might be two hours."

"Looks like 6:30 then," RB confirmed.

"What'll ye boys have?"

"What do you have?" we asked.

"Eggs, bacon, a pancake, sausage, how wood ye like yer eggs?"

"Over easy," I blurted out.

"That's good by me," Doug agreed. "We'll all do that, right guys?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine," I said. "This group isn't hard to please."

With the next morning's breakfast decided, lunch moved up our list of priorities. We walked along the tight street towards 55 North. Cars parked on both sides offered a gauntlet for cars zipping by but the locals were experts. The crisp air and sea breeze

enlivened my senses although I was still running on adrenaline. It was hard to believe we were finally here, in Ireland, the four of us ready to tackle some great courses. Taking in the sights we passed a few storefronts, some with their metal storm shutters pulled down, a church that might have been connected with past conflicts between the Republic and the North, the local library, plus the prevalent sea crashing its frothy waves along the rocky shoreline.

The restaurant actually featured two locales, with 55 North located on the lower level looking over the water. They offered a variety of sandwiches as well as Guinness on tap. The four of us grabbed our selections somehow managing the Euro–Pound-Dollar thing. We probably ended up not leaving a suitable tip, but hey, the dollar exchange rate was initially confusing. During lunch we discussed our course rota, weather, County Down as well as a few stories about RB that allowed JJ to get a feel for the “cruise director”. Being the rookie on the trip I felt it might be a good idea for JJ to assess his playing partners outlook on this lunchtime excursion so he knew who to jab and how far he could insert the needle. He already picked up on Doug’s subtle attacks on RB.

After a brief lesson on the protocol for insulting one another, we finished lunch, ready to begin our assault on Ireland’s finest. Portstewart’s River course seemed to be the selected target, not too demanding of a start. As we headed back to Rachael’s, the nonsense started.

“Are you going to opt for the trolley RB or put it on your shoulder?” Doug inquired.

“I thought you’d offer to double Doug since you’re the young buck of the group,” RB shot back. “I’m not takin’ any wheels this trip.”

“Yeah, but your wheels are bound to fall off,” Doug laughed.

We climbed the steps to our B&B entering the hallway again meeting Rachael.

“Dijya fine’ it boys?”

“Yes we did,” JJ replied. “It was good, just what we needed.”

“Are ye goin’ oot fer a game?” she asked.

“I think we’re gonna venture over to Portstewart,” RB stated.

“Yoo’ll be suited jus’ fine t’ere,” Rachael agreed. “D’ ye know where yer goin’?”

The four of us looked at each another. We hadn’t the slightest clue. Rachael gave us directions. Within five minutes of leaving the inn, RB took a wrong turn. Portrush employed a simple routing for its main road. It encircled the town with various spokes pointing in different directions. We missed the spoke to Portstewart. No worries though, we just completed another loop, hit the A2 proceeding west to the links. The road hugged the jagged coastline cutting in and out of the rolling terrain tumbling down to the sea. The view up the coast contrasted the emerald hills, deep blue waters of the north Atlantic and an Irish sky dotted with puffy clouds. Along the way we passed the short Old Course, a par 64 layout playing along the shoreline. The ever-present ocean breeze kept the flagsticks from achieving upright positions while supporting numerous gulls drifting by in lazy flight. Aye, like they say over here, naye wind, naye golf.

“Looks pretty nice wouldn’t you say,” RB observed.

“A bit different from Scotland,” I offered.

“That coastline is quite a sight, huh guys?” Doug offered. “Just like Lake Decatur, right RB?”

“Or the ole South Side Lake,” RB responded.

PORTSTEWART – DAY 1

We approached the village of Portstewart on the A2. The main road curled downhill to a quaint row of storefronts on the left. To our right the North Atlantic waves pounded huge rocks set randomly along the shore. Patrons ambled down the sidewalk window-shopping while enjoying the breezy sunshine. As we made our way down the main road through town I marveled at the beauty of the coastal view. Indeed we were in the right place. Up ahead lay the traffic circle Rachel informed us about. We successfully negotiated the turn, driving west along a bluff overlooking the town we had just left behind. In two minutes we came upon the Portstewart Golf Club. RB routed the van into the carpark on the east end of the clubhouse. For a moment silence prevailed.

“Looks like the place,” RB announced. “Let’s do it.”

“Aye, guv, let’s get it airborne,” JJ agreed.

I opened my door, checking the Irish air. The crucial task of ascertaining the proper amount of clothing was my first order of business. The steady breeze would require an adequate windshirt.

“Hey guys, check out the water. Those waves are pretty impressive.” I announced looking at the North Atlantic continuing to be amazed by the deep blue waves breaking white across the strand of beach.

We peered across the street towards the ocean. The seashore had attracted its share of residential development. Construction cranes towered over various shapes of condominiums. At the time I didn’t realize it but Portstewart was one of the wealthier enclaves in Northern Ireland. Directly across from the clubhouse stood a rise of rugged cliffs greeting the craggy coastline. If any dwellings were to be erected on this site they would have to be well engineered plus well financed.

“This certainly isn’t South Carolina, guvna.” JJ kidded.

“Too bad they couldn’t have built a few holes down there, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s got some potential – obviously for condos only!” JJ replied.

I grabbed the bags out of the van scrambling to find my shoes. Clouds danced briskly across the late afternoon sky. A few players made their way to their cars giving us the eye as we unloaded our gear. It was evident we were Americans. The locals who had teed off early were now off to their favorite pub to tell a few stories, catch the football match while quaffing a few pints. We'd get that chance in about four hours.

While the reputation for the Portstewart links garnered international acclaim, the clubhouse failed to make an impression. A nondescript two-story building, its appearance was that of boxes stacked atop one another -- obviously a utilitarian structure meant to serve the basic needs of its members. I surmised we wouldn't be spending much time within its confines. It lacked the character more notable clubhouses possess. Walking around the front of the building I looked out at the dunescape towards the first tee of the Strand course. The other three made their way into the pro shop while I stood there glued to the scenery. After a few minutes I entered the shop.

Inside RB and JJ were scoping out possible souvenirs from the dark, rectangular room. It was a cross between your grandfather's crowded attic and a rustic antique den. At the end of the room sat a glass display counter. Standing behind it was a woman with a weathered appearance chatting with Doug. Shirts in dusty plastic bags lined a few shelves. Golf bags with other equipment offerings lined two narrow aisles leading to the counter. I looked at the prices, trying to convert euros to dollars, but eventually decided to reserve my funds for trinkets from Royal Portrush and County Down.

"What do we need to do, RB?" I asked.

"They want to see your PGA card. I think we're good to go. Not many players out in front of us," he replied.

I introduced myself to the spry, forty-something woman behind the counter. She asked where home was and I told her Wisconsin. Had she ever heard of the Green Bay Packers? She nodded yes.

"That's where I live."

"American football," she commented. "So violent."

She asked if I had been to Northern Ireland before. No, I said, but I was looking forward to a fantastic week of touring and golf. We indicated we'd be back on Monday to play the Strand. She wished us well. With that, the four of us headed out the door to tackle the Riverside layout.

The first hole, a downhill par four played into a stiff breeze. All of us managed to make contact, the adrenaline pumping through our jet-lagged bodies. RB offered an array of cigars. Getting them lit proved to be a challenge with the southerly breeze. Eventually we were sauntering down the first fairway, smoke blowing in the wind, giving each other critiques of our opening tee shots. Of course we jumped on RB right away.

"Got a healthy lash in at that one, huh?" I quipped.

“Don’t know what the over and under is on that long putter,” Doug rattled. “Two, maybe three holes? You can’t bring that stuff over here for chrissakes, this IS the home of golf!” “Showing your age with that thing RB,” JJ chimed in.

RB let it all roll off his shoulders. As I managed to lose my second shot in an acre of wispy fescue, RB didn’t wait long to knock down the first birdie of the trip. Despite the abuse he played three successful shots in a row. For me, I just wanted to get the joints working. That’s the beauty of golf in the UK. Most of the locals could care less if you shot in the seventies. Their main interest is what you thought of the course, the challenge, the weather, who won the match, and how you enjoyed their hospitality.

After a stringent par-three test back into the same breeze, holes three and four headed west on a flat piece of the property paralleling the River Bann. To my right I could see marvelous dunes, some as high as fifty feet, obscuring ribbons of emerald fairways. On the port side, so to speak, parallel fairways from our course were visible. The crisp air puffed across the links, whipping the fescue in graceful waves of muted browns. My bag strapped across my back brought a feeling of laxity similar to the days of my youth chasing shots into a setting sun. Fully aware of my natural surroundings, peering across the river at small cottages set into the emerald hillside, it felt mystical. Turning towards the dunes, I scanned the terrain for other players tackling the more demanding Strand layout. Ahh, that challenge would have to wait a few days. Right now it was all about hitting a few shots, enjoying a good walk, telling a few lies and trying not to light myself afire with my cigar.

“Not bad, huh Haigs?” RB piped up as we walked along.

“How good is it to be in Ireland?” I asked.

“What do you suppose is tucked over there?” RB inquired, pointing at the massive dunes.

“I’d guess that would be Monday’s adventure. Wonder if any of these holes run up that way?” I countered.

Our foursome continued their journey over the next few holes ultimately arriving at the short, crescent-shaped par four ninth. A pasture with a barbed-wire fence flanked the right side of the hole. Several sheep, Ireland’s national animal, dotted the hillside enjoying a late lunch.

“This looks drivable,” Doug deadpanned.

“Yeah, only says about 270 on the card,” I uttered.

“Rip it RB!” Doug egged RB on.

“What do you hit?” RB wondered.

“I think you’d better take all of it, RB,” I advised

“Bang that Callaway, guv,” JJ added. “Damn the sheep.”

The small kidney-shaped green was cut into a high dune, a bunker guarding its entrance on the lower right hand side of the putting surface. No doubt it could be reached, especially with the wind now behind us. Club selection would be the key. Anything

short and right would find the bunker, long was no good with tall fescue occupying a severe slope plus nobody wanted to bother the sheep.

We comically discussed our options, fired a few extra balls and headed towards the deceptive target. In the end I managed to make a birdie, my first on Irish soil. For the remainder of the round our games would show flashes of brilliance. Being with three other avid players made me quickly forget about score. Too often score got in the way of fully enjoying a new experience. Heck, this was Ireland. The most important things all of us would be bringing home were memories of the weeklong trip.

The remainder of the round led us across the rolling terrain hugging the river. It may have been the thirteenth hole where the fun really started. Striding up to the tee RB announced out loud, "Wonder if you could drive a ball across it?"

Maybe I knew my friend all too well. His comment immediately elicited a chuckle. The two of us have played all around the US, Scotland and now Ireland. Upon confronting a particular hole, say, a short, downhill par three, RB would wonder if he could throw a ball on the green. He'd come up with these "wonderments" from time to time. They usually always resulted in a good laugh. So here we stood on the northern bank of the River Bann scanning the far bank in order to estimate the carry.

"Looks doable," RB commented.

"I can't see that far," I offered an attempt at humor about my eyesight.

"That's for sure," JJ laughed.

Doug stood there for a brief moment and finally spoke.

"Are we gonna do this?" he challenged.

I went to my bag for a ball destined to live the rest of its life either across the river or on its bottom. Looking into the late afternoon sun proved challenging in determining if a ball made its way across or fell short. JJ hit a shot that found the water. Stepping up next, I put a twisted contortion of a swing in motion resulting in solid contact. The four of us scanned the horizon for a result.

"See anything?" I asked.

"I didn't see a splash. Did you see anything, Doug?" RB inquired.

"Nope."

"I think you knocked it across Haig," JJ announced.

"Figures," I said. "My best effort of the day on a ball I can no longer play."

We took another look across the river -- nothing but pasture, rolling hills and a few small cottages. Northern Ireland looked back.

"Why even try?" RB offered.

Each of us struck our tee shots down the fairway making way towards the final holes ultimately leading uphill to the clubhouse. As darkness enveloped our surroundings, we hustled down the eighteenth hitting careless shots. The cool evening air whipped by the steady breeze encouraged us to stow our gear quickly in the van. The adrenaline rush faded from my body. Inside the Renault, the passenger seat actually offered a comfortable respite from a thirty-hour first day.

“Not a bad walk, huh fellas?” RB quipped.

“Take me to my bed, please,” I insisted.

“C’mon, time to rally Haigs.” RB replied.

“Man, it’s starting to get a little chilly. What’s for dinner?” JJ inquired.

“It’s warmer in Atlanta,” Doug kidded.

“Nothin’ like playing til you run out of daylight,” RB added. “Yep, the Irish evening air is freshening.”

“Guinness!” I shouted. “An IV of Guinness and my bed please!”

Indeed the day had been an endurance contest. Flying all night, lacking quality sleep, plus only eating a sandwich for lunch produced a level of fatigue capable of inducing eight hours of dead man’s sleep. At least that’s what I was hoping for. Tomorrow we’d also be up early on our way to Ballyliffin.

“Where are we going to eat?” Doug asked.

“How ‘bout that Italian place right across from Rachel’s?” RB offered.

“That would hit the spot. I’d love to grab some Italian food,” I agreed.

“Whatever you guys decide is fine with me. I could go for a cold one, a lil pasta and a cozy chair,” JJ replied.

“Perhaps we could grab a chilled one but I doubt we’ll get anything ice cold,” I confirmed.

We laughed a bit at that one. Judging from my experience in Scotland a few years earlier it quickly became apparent “ice cold” could only be used to describe the weather. I don’t think I saw an ice cube during that trip. Our first innkeeper at North Berwick, Ian, had an agreeable answer for why the Scots weren’t real big on ice – they lost the recipe. His response managed to shut me up. Once again I assumed being an American, there was only one way to enjoy a drink. Perhaps I was wrong. Either way I agreed to enjoy what might be served to me during the week in Ireland.

The ride back to Rachel’s took fifteen minutes. Surprisingly we didn’t get lost. Negotiating the tight driveway into the car park almost seemed like a video game for RB. His driving prowess proved to be most impressive on day one. It became apparent my hours behind the wheel would be limited. We hopped out of the Renault, grabbed our clubs, and headed for the back door. As we entered there again stood Rachel.

“Boys,” she directed, “Jus’ leave ye clubs doon in t’is room. They’ll b’ fine ere.”

“Saves us from luggin em upstairs,” agreed JJ. “Probably saves the woodwork too.”

“Mos’ certainly does,” she quipped.

Everyone opted to wash up before venturing across the street. By now darkness had descended on the seaside village. The cool, damp air added a noticeable chill to the evening. Fortunately the walk to Don Giovanni's encompassed a mere fifty feet. The hostess greeted us warmly, leading the way to a table in the middle of the small restaurant. The aroma of garlic and olive oil filled the room. The process of sitting down, settling in for a good meal with a Guinness in hand allowed me to feel as if I'd accomplished something monumental this day. It felt supremely satisfying.

"A toast to a great first day in Ireland," RB announced, raising his glass of stout.

"Absolutely."

"Great spot."

"Life is good."

We slogged down the Guinness in celebration of our arrival. Our waitress served a loaf of garlic bread, which remained in the basket for about a minute. Peering out the huge plate glass windows at Don's I looked directly at the Beulah Guest House. My legs appreciated the closeness of the accommodations. After the meal, I think all of us went for the default – lasagna, which proved to be very good, an evening shower would soon be followed by sufficient sack time. The links at Ballyliffin looked to be a bit more difficult than Portstewart's warm up course. We would find out in 12 hours.

BALLY-GOLFIN'

I awoke Sunday morning craving another hour of sleep. The shower procedure from the previous evening confounded me. I couldn't figure to pull the draw cord to activate the shower unit. Flashbacks from Scotland with the diabolical "Mirra Sport 7" episode danced through my head. There Doug and I took cold showers due to a malfunctioning heater core in our shower. The Scots didn't believe in water heaters either apparently.

"Not again," I muttered to myself, thinking back to Scotland. "I want a HOT shower."

Eventually I grabbed the cord and the shower motor activated. Now, in the morning I knew exactly how to proceed. The bathroom occupied the space of a small closet. However, everything was clean, in working order and served the purpose well. I looked out the small window to the Irish world – raining of course. Perhaps today would be the time to test my waterproof gear. I went downstairs to the breakfast room absorbing the smell of sausage and eggs. Rain splattered across the large bay windows overlooking the damp street.

Inside the breakfast room sat a large antique buffet offering various juice selections, cereals, milk, yogurt and fruit cocktail. I grabbed a bowl of granola. RB walked in surveying the area.

“RB, this is really nice. If you go hungry it’s your own fault.”
“This IS nice, isn’t it?” he replied.

Doug and JJ joined the group and shortly after Rachel brought in plates with eggs, bacon, sausage, tomatoes, and toast.

“This looks great Rachel,” Doug approved.
“I hope ye’ boys like it,” she responded. “Lemme know if t’ere’s anythin’ else y’ need.”
“Just like home,” JJ kidded.

We devoured the offering. With the granola, a few extra pieces of toast, juice, I filled my stomach in preparation for what appeared to be a dreary walk around Ballyliffin Golf Club. Steady rain continued to streak down the windows of the Buelah House.

Taking care of any last minute ablutions, the four of us collected in the main floor’s hallway. Rachael unlocked the door to the storage room. We grabbed our clubs, exited out the back door and immediately felt the cool rain hit our faces. RB jumped in behind the wheel, carefully guiding us out of the car park. We traveled west towards Ballyliffin.

“See where we going, Haigs?” RB asked

Riding shotgun, I peered at the coastal route indicated by the guide of Ireland map in my hands.

“Got it RB, just head towards Portstewart and keep going along the coast. Looks pretty adventurous.”

“Just keep us on land, guvna,” JJ blurted out from the back seat.

“Any more requests?” RB invited.

“Yeah,” Doug joked, “I want seventy-five and sunny today. Think you could manage that with the big guy?”

The big guy is Irish. He prefers fifty and rainy to test our skills,” RB exclaimed. “Suck it up.”

Rain continued to batter the windshield. Doug’s request didn’t appear realistic. Grey clouds hung close to the coastal cliffs drenching the roadway with breezy squalls. The wipers flapped back and forth, the heater kept it cozy and in sharp contrast to our Scottish adventure, we did have more than one CD. About twenty clicks up the route we veered away from the water, heading inland. A few bungalows dotted the landscape along with sheep-filled prairies bisected by wire fences.

“Not much out here, huh?” I offered.

“Let’s make sure the ole Renault keeps moving, RB. I don’t want to be sleeping with any sheep tonight.” Doug griped.

“C’mon Doug, probably be the best thing you’ve had a chance at for awhile.” RB shot back.

The jab brought a chuckle as we wound our way towards the Lough Foyle. The ferry would cut about an hour off the trip to Ballyliffin. Apparently it only took twenty minutes or so to cross but the closest bridge traversing the waterway sat well to the south around Londonderry. We had to make the ferry or our tee time would be in jeopardy. Our road continued to curve through flat grasslands, past a remote prison until a sign indicated the ferry terminal was five clicks ahead.

“How’s the time?” RB asked.

“We’re doing fine I think.” I replied. “Just keep driving towards that ferry.”

“Now that would be a bummer. Being in an Irish prison way the hell out here,” JJ observed. “Even if you escaped you wouldn’t be anywhere.”

“You’d have lots of furry friends though,” Doug added.

Finally, we arrived at our checkpoint, if you could call it that. On either side of the road sat white structures, one designated as the terminal center and the other perhaps a residence. The terminal center occupied a building that reminded me of one I might see at a miniature golf course. Small enough to house a person selling ferry tickets I figured. Black wrought-iron gates defined the loading and unloading areas. There were no other cars or people about. Following the sign to the loading area we came face-to-face with a ten foot high locked gate displaying a notice indicating the ferry had been suspended yesterday due to weather. Apparently the name of the security company managing the premises went by the name of Checkmate. With no live bodies around and no other cars looking to cross the lough, we indeed felt as if we had been “mated”. Rain continued to pour as we sat looking at each other.

“This doesn’t look good.” I muttered.

“We’ve still got twenty minutes before the thing is supposed to be here.” RB said optimistically.

“I wonder if the weather today is bad enough to suspend this?” I wondered.

“Think I should call the golf course just in case?” Doug offered.

“Yeah, that might be a good idea. See how late we can make it,” RB advised.

“I just can’t believe no one is around.” I said staring at the notice on the gate.

A few minutes passed by. Doug got directions through Londonderry if we needed to head that way. It would take another hour to get to Ballyliffin if that was to be our course of action. The clock ticked closer to nine, the time of the first ferry departure. We anxiously awaited any signs of life on this grey, dreary morning.

“This is gonna suck if we have to drive down to Londonderry,” I said surveying the map.

“What else do we have to do?” RB replied, trying to calm me down.

“Probably could get on back at Portstewart,” JJ suggested. “It’s closer than an hour.”

“Yeah, but we’re playing there tomorrow,” RB said. I wanna see something new.”

“Maybe we could swim across,” Doug joked.

“Greased watermelon contest?” RB offered, referring back to a Fourth of July tradition. “Oh man, remember those melees? I about lost my life a few times in those,” Doug recalled.

“What was that?” JJ asked.

“Every Fourth of July they had a bunch of pool contests at our club in Decatur. The finale involved tossing a greased watermelon in the pool. The guy to get it out on the side was the winner. You usually had a couple of eighteen year olds being mauled by a bunch of grade school kids, quite the free-for-all.”

“It was out of control,” RB added.

“Sounds festive,” JJ replied.

Just then a body walked alongside the car and proceeded to unlock the gate. I rolled down the window peering at the secretive woman concealed by a black hooded raincoat who was, for the moment, our savior.

“Ma’am... Is the nine o clock ferry coming?” I asked.

“Certainly tis. Look, thar she is now,” she said, pointing in the distance.

We peered across the water through the mist and sure enough the small ferry came chugging at us. We exhaled a huge sigh of relief, which in turn fogged up our windows.

“Must be livin’ right.” RB surmised.

“She was like a ghost coming out of the mist. Didn’t see her until she started to unlock the gate. Geez, when they say nine o’clock they mean nine o’clock.” I said.

“Well, go get the ticket Haigs.”

Exiting the warmth of the van, I quickly became reacquainted with a blast of cold rain on my face. Being near the lough made it seem colder. I wondered if I had brought enough gear. By now the small ferry had docked allowing a few cars to roll off. From the distance it looked like maybe ten or fifteen cars might fit on her deck. There was only one deck with an elevated control tower on the side. It wasn’t what I was expecting but it would do. Purchasing the round trip ticket, I asked the woman how far it was to Ballyliffin.

“What’s the scoop,” RB asked as I jumped in the van.

“Wait until she waves us through,” I said. “Then the guy driving the ferry will guide us on. She said the course was within an hour’s ride.”

“Did she say this thing would make it across?” Doug wondered, looking at the rust on the sides of the ferry.

“Didn’t ask. You said you can swim,” I replied.

“Yeah but his clubs can’t,” JJ responded.

“They’ve got rentals,” RB chimed in, taking the exchange a little further.

“You’re gonna get wet either way Doug,” I added. “Welcome to Ireland.”

In fact, that comment was appropriate. After crossing the lough we would in fact be in the Republic of Ireland once again. That would mean the dreaded shift from euros to pounds. Carrying three currencies was a task.

On the way across the lough I decided to get out of the van to stretch my legs. The rain fell at a slower pace but an ominous dark canopy ahead suggested it wasn't about to blow over. A narrow sitting area along the side of the ferry underneath the steering tower looked as if it was worth investigating. There were two restrooms available and for some reason now when I see one of those signs it serves as a call of nature. Maybe that was another bonus of turning fifty. After finishing my nautical ritual, I returned to the car and joined in the conversation.

“Where did you go Haigs?” RB asked.
“Just looking for a life preserver for Doug,” I replied.

Only two other cars accompanied us on our journey across the narrow strait. One featured a couple with three rambunctious children curiously exploring the ferry's deck in the rain. Inside the other vehicle sat a man reading a newspaper. Hopefully business would get better as the day went by. At least we'd be coming back across in a few hours.

With the sight of land coming into clearer view, the ferry driver jockeyed the boat in a northerly direction lining up the approach to the launch ramp. Within minutes we heard the engines reverse as the boat slowed its pace across the choppy waves. Other vessels dotted the shoreline, an assortment of commercial fishing boats, as well as a few pleasure craft. Gulls drifted along the rainy breeze searching for breakfast. A few buildings sat patiently along this side of the lough lending it a more colonized look. We drove onto the land, passed through a narrow road and rolled down the coast towards our destination. Time was now on our side although the skies continued to cast gloom over the Irish countryside.

I scanned the map seeking our destination. RB, now fully in tune with the wheel drove over the damp pavement awaiting my instructions.

“I was a little concerned with the ferry not showing up,” I broke the silence.
“Yeah you were acting like a bride being left at the altar,” RB replied.
“Well I didn't want to be driving around all day.”
“Haigs, we've got six days to do whatever we want. When is the last time that's happened huh?” RB asked. “Let's have a little fun.”

Of course he was right. Maybe as navigator I was too intent on maintaining our schedule. We continued to parallel the lough looking for a turn that would take us west to Ballyliffin. A lone cargo vessel made its way south along the waterway towards Londonderry.

“Yeah, that would've pushed us up against it a bit. But who's gonna be playin' on a day like today?” Doug offered.

“Americans!” the others chimed in.

“Moville, RB. When we get there we gotta turn right,” I instructed.

“How much further?”

“Should be about 10 clicks I’m guessing.”

“Listen to you delivering the Irish slang,” RB needled.

“Just seeing if you’re paying attention.”

We hit Moville, made a right turn up a hill driving northwest through more rolling hills. Dwellings were randomly scattered along the way. Navigating towards the sea RB found the road to Ballyliffin Golf Club. To our left the hills graduated to towering emerald slopes. On our right we were treated with a view of Irish linksland plunging towards the Atlantic. In the distance the slopes turned upright forming tall cliffs looking down on the menacing coastline. Between the water and rocky cliffs a narrow ribbon of road danced its way westward towards destinations we would never see. Clouds rested on the slopes while rain continued to fall across our windshield. The view was unlike anything I had seen during my limited travels.

In five minutes we turned into the entrance of the Ballyliffin Golf Club. The facility featured two courses, the Glashedy Links plus the Old Links. A modern, two-story, stone clubhouse awaited us at the end of the drive. A few cars sat in the car park along with a touring bus. Golf carts were also present, a feature that surprised me. The place seemed to be very “Americanized”.

“Looks like the place,” RB announced.

Stepping out of the van I took a three-sixty look around. There simply was nothing else out here except the golf course and its sentry clubhouse. The vastness of the place took a bit of getting used to. Raindrops continued to fall as clouds blowing in off the water hovered over the linksland. I searched through the gear in the back of the van, grabbed my shoes, rainsuit, and threw the bag on my shoulder, before heading towards the main entrance of the Ballyliffin clubhouse.

Outside the main door were several golfers, undoubtedly delivered by the touring van parked nearby, discussing their options. They briefly glanced at another group of American invaders and went back to their business. All of a sudden I heard an eruption from one player.

“You’ve screwed up this whole trip!” came a voice with distinct volume.

I imagine folks back in Moville could’ve heard the blast. Not wanting to stick around for the festivities I entered the clubhouse with RB.

“That’s why we’re not traveling in a large group, Haigs,” RB mentioned, having heard the outburst.

“You got that right,” I agreed.

“Some folks you just can’t please at all. Here we are half way around the world in what appears to be a great spot and that happens. Makes you wonder,” RB sighed

The interior of the clubhouse sported a modern décor with rose-colored wallpaper dotted with pictures framed in light oak. There were pictures of Arnold Palmer, Nick Faldo, club committee members and a young man named Rory McIlroy who happened to hold the course record. He looked as though he was no more than sixteen, his dark curly hair and boyish look making me long for my junior days.

“Must be a player,” I said to RB.

“Lotsa hair, huh?”

We entered the golf shop and were greeted warmly by a young man who appeared content to be inside. The shop was similar to any I’d seen in the states, adorned with oak slat wall displays with various shaped tables featuring neatly folded shirts and knickers. RB approached the counter and introduced himself.

“You were the fellas that called from the ferry,” the young man exclaimed.

“Yep, we made it, but at the time the dock was disserted.”

RB and the Irishman exchanged small talk as the three of us looked perused the wares. Having just brought a couple of golf caps along, I came across a substantial, black, gore-tex rain hat. The tag identified the manufacturer as Galvin Green, a name I was not familiar with. The tag appeared to have a 39-pound price. After my simple dollar conversion of doubling, I felt the 78-dollar fee might be a nice souvenir from the trip. Besides, the rain continued to fall steadily so it would serve the purpose well. Chances are I would use it the entire week. I grabbed the hat and took it to the counter inquiring about the price.

“Yes, thats 79 pounds,” came the reply.

“79? I thought it was 39.” I blurted out. “Think I’ll take a rain check on it.”

“Oh but this is the finest of hats,” said the young man, trying to dislodge 160 dollars from my pocket.

“It should be for that price,” I muttered under my breath.

Needless to say, Galvin didn’t make the trip back to Wisconsin. I donned my Titleist cap, settled the fees and went to the locker room to empty my tank. Adjusting my rainsuit, I shuffled out of the locker room, down the hallway past Rory to my appointed tee time with the Glasheedy Links. The rain continued, as did the healthy breeze.

“Besides the fact that it’s raining, cold, and an umbrella is of little use, I’m ready to go,” Doug deadpanned.

I looked at JJ and RB. JJ appeared to be wondering what he’d gotten himself into. RB stoically carried his bag to the first tee, took out his driver whizzing a few practice swings. I lagged behind as the rain intensified.

“I don’t know how I’ll hold onto this thing,” Doug offered.

“You need some of these,” I replied showing off my new rain gloves. “They got ‘em in the shop.”

“79 pounds?” Doug asked.

The comment elicited a brief laugh

The first four holes of the links traversed rolling hills combed with healthy fescue. Fairways wiggled their way through the dunes to challenging greens that moved in random directions. Puddles collected in the low areas as we made our way out towards the ocean. In the distance squalls could be seen moving along the coast. Occasionally a few rays of sunlight poked through on the emerald slopes south of us. It was a brutal start to what turned out to be a wonderful layout. The signature hole had to be the seventh, a par three with a vertical drop to the green of perhaps ninety feet. Occupying the highest parcel of ground, it offered a glorious panorama of sea, linksland and the green Irish slopes featured in travel brochures. By the time we arrived at the elevated tee the rain exited the links leaving an adequate breeze to dry us out.

“Thank god it stopped,” JJ cheered.

He went about his duties of re-equipping himself with the proper outer garments, stowing his umbrella and taking in a bit of the view. All of us took time out to reorganize our attire. For the moment it looked as if we’d be able to play a few holes in bright sunshine.

The four of us stood on this hilltop in Northern Ireland capturing a “Kodak moment”. Below us lay a kidney-shaped green with a water hazard flanking the right side. Club selection relied entirely on the talent of the players with the freshening breeze defending the flagstick. We struck our shots, navigated down the hillside and peered back up towards the tee.

“I bet I could’ve thrown a ball on the green,” RB blurted out.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” I agreed in jest.

The final two holes on the outward nine, two par fours, consisted of a stern dogleg made tougher by the wind coming off the water directly in our face. The ninth, a shorter challenge, headed back to the clubhouse.

“That was interesting, hey guvna?” JJ surmised.

“Those rain gloves really do work, don’t they?” I said.

“Not a bad nine considering we got washed and rinsed for the first five, huh?” RB contributed.

“All I know is its sunny and warm in Atlanta.” Doug kidded. “But I would rather be here, although I probably could find three better partners.”

Practicing a tradition of American golf, we grabbed Cokes and candy bars at the turn. It was then off to hole ten. The back nine, without much of a sprinkle, ran across a flatter

stretch of ground until the par five thirteenth. It marched up a slope towards the front nine. The next hole turned about face offering a downhill par three followed by perhaps the best hole on the course, the par four fifteenth. This hole was nasty. Quickly coming to mind were the par fours from Carnoustie. Their collection would have welcomed this brute. The hole traversed bumpy ground, bending right to left in a driving area flanked by bunkers then rising majestically to a putting surface only quality shots could find. I recall flogging about the fescue turning the hole into a par five as the wind dismissed my weak attempts to reach the green. The hole required two well-struck shots, which RB executed. A par felt like a birdie. A double felt like it was supposed to – it stung.

The final trifecta, a par four, five and four deposited us back to the clubhouse with little fanfare. Hole eighteen, now downwind, offered us a chance to finish on a high note. RB actually did. His drive evaded radar, sniping left onto a tall dune generously covered with fescue. It took awhile but ultimately he found his Callaway perched well above sea level. The game was on as they say. RB thrashed at the ball but the stance, the thick grass, plus Ballyliffin got the better of the man. In the end the best result from hole eighteen came from the photo op of RB clinging to the side of the dune, his arms and club raised in triumph for whatever reason I can only imagine. It turned out to be a classic picture.

The walk to the clubhouse seemed to be just as draining as the walk around the entire course. I was anxious to sit down and tell a few stories. We deposited our gear, cleaned up a bit then ambled upstairs to the grill room. Several locals occupied the chairs, tables and bar stools yelling at televisions displaying soccer, or as the Europeans say, a football match. We secured a table next to a window looking over the eighteenth green of the Old Course.

A round of Guinness was the first order of duty. Through all my years of playing this wonderful game nothing compares to the post-round custom of sharing thoughts and stories from the day's play over a beverage (or 3). Sometimes this ritual gets pushed aside by family obligations or trivial emergencies. None of that would happen this day. The four of us had no place to go.

"That was a pretty good golf course, don't ya think?" RB queried.

"Yep, uh huh, definitely," came a chorus.

"Kinda reminded me of Kingsbarns or the Straits," I observed.

Raising his glass in salutation, RB toasted, "Here's to Irish golf and taking the opportunity to delve into it!"

"Haigs, I still think you should've gone for the hat," RB prodded.

"Think it would have helped?" I asked.

"Nope." Doug shot back.

"How the hell can you sell a rain hat for \$160.00?" I replied.

"You only have to sell one of 'em." RB quipped.

"I thought it was quite stylish, but damned if I'd buy one." JJ contributed.

"You probably would have gotten a free bowl of soup," Doug suggested, taking a page out of Caddyshack.

"Just not into financing Galvin's extravagance," I confessed.

The laughs continued as we feasted on sandwiches washed down with stout. RB's insatiable appetite for chips covered in ketchup involved bribing the waitress out of all the "red sauce" packets she could muster. It would be a recurring theme on the trip. Next time I'll have to smuggle a bottle for him in my golf bag.

As the afternoon unwound and the Guinness offerings continued, we strolled around the grill room talking to some members, glanced at the football match and stepped out to the balcony looking northward over the property. The sun continued to filter through the grey clouds casting late afternoon shadows on the dunes. After taking in as much as we could the time came to retrace our path back to Portrush. It was a good start. As the week continued Ballyliffin would come to be the hidden gem of the trip. Regardless of the local's preference for the original eighteen, the Glashedy Links proved to be a worthy and enjoyable challenge.

RB drove the van out of the entrance pointing it east towards our rendezvous with the ferry. The day had changed dramatically from our early arrival, the sun falling lethargically from a partly cloudy sky. We rolled along the coast road passing modest homes clinging to the hillside.

"What did you like about the place, Haigs?" RB asked.

"I thought it was pretty good for being a new course. Some of those par fours were tough," I replied.

"Seven was the highlight, no doubt," Doug piped up.

"None of us could hit the green," JJ laughed.

"That's cuz we just came out of an Irish monsoon," RB exclaimed.

"Doug, you gotta get some rain gloves, right J?" I said.

"Right guv."

"How about fifteen back into that wind? Brutal!" RB claimed.

"You hit two quality shots there but I liked that second shot you had on eighteen, RB," JJ announced.

The animated commentary continued until our arrival at the ferry terminal. This time a few more cars escorted us onto the steel deck. Gulls drifted on the breeze occasionally dipping down to look for a handout. The trip back across the lough seemed shorter. Perhaps it was due to the change in weather. We approached the eastern shore, made our way back on land and continued to Portrush. Along the route water poured over the cliffs lining the shore road. The low angle of the sun enhanced the color of the landscape producing vivid greens contrasted against blue tints from the water and sky. It was Ireland on steroids.

RB made it successfully to Rachel's, displaying a deft touch sliding the van into the carpark. I gingerly exited my copilot's seat. Beside us were two vans that most likely belonged to golfers. RB noticed one of them had its side mirror ripped off. We laughed at his observation. Quickly Doug challenged his driver.

“Think you can make it the week with our mirrors intact?”

“No problem,” RB stated confidently.

“50-50,” JJ added.

Each of us grabbed our bags heading to the back door of the B&B. Rachel greeted us once again as she unlocked the storage room to deposit our equipment.

“Didya fine it a’right?” she asked.

“No problem,” RB asserted once again.

“Rachel what about a dinner option?” Doug asked.

“Thar’s a few places in town still open. D’ye like oriental?”

“That’s great,” the four of us replied.

“Let’s wash up a bit and head over to the place,” RB directed.

Within fifteen minutes we were mobile and in search of oriental sustenance. Walking along the quiet street we passed darkened storefronts waiting for Monday to arrive. The brisk wind blew off the water quickening our pace. The day’s travel, golf, carrying one’s clubs, combined with the overall excitement of playing in Ireland had taken its toll. I was tired but a small amount of adrenaline kept me placing one foot in front of the other.

It reminded me of our final round at Carnoustie several years prior. Upon placing the clubs in the van that final day, I blurted out, “That’s enough.” Enough golf had been played on six (sorry Maybole National) outstanding venues and to continue on would have diluted any further enjoyment of that experience. Quite simply I didn’t think my body could take any more.

Our dinner destination sat at the end of the street cleverly hidden from four hungry American linksters. Being Sunday night the place was dead with only two other tables enjoying their meals. The décor could have been found at any Chinese take out in the states. A young oriental man with tired eyes welcomed us and showed us to a table. He probably wondered what apple cart we had fallen off.

“What looks good?” I asked scanning the generic menu.

“Food of any type.” RB responded.

“Is that Johnny Cash?” JJ asked referring to a twangy rendition streaming from a boom box tucked in the corner.

Sure enough the ole country western genre had found its way over to Northern Ireland.

“In an oriental place??” Doug questioned.

“J Cash ate oriental,” RB added.

We laughed a bit at the odd combination. The young man returned to the table, took our orders, and promptly vanished into the kitchen. Johnny C continued his serenade. I almost started to sing along -- almost.

“So how many stars do you think the Northern Ireland Travel Bureau has bestowed on this place?” Doug joked.

“I’ll tell you after I finish my meal,” JJ replied. “If it stays down, guv.”

“Do you think Darren Clarke has eaten here?” Doug continued. “How ‘bout that Rory kid?”

“Probably eats here every Sunday night. I’ll bet we just missed him,” I deadpanned.

“Portstewart tomorrow men,” RB announced in an attempt to shut Doug up.

“I’d like to see what’s on the other side of those dunes,” I said.

“Supposed to be nine of the best starting holes up here,” JJ offered.

“Bring it on,” Doug challenged.

As the discussion continued our food arrived. It was hot, tasty and hit the spot. My cashew chicken didn’t last long. A similar fate accompanied two egg rolls. By now our table was the only sign of life in the place. Our waiter/busboy began clearing our plates.

“Good stuff,” RB remarked to the young man.

“Thank you,” came his quiet reply.

We settled the bill, gathered our wits while walking towards the door leaving the young man and Johnny C behind. By this hour, on Sunday evening in Portrush, everything had closed. Darkness enveloped the city streets. The cool sea breeze continued causing me to place my hands in the pockets of my windbreaker. It certainly wasn’t like it had been back home.

As we continued to make our way back to Rachel’s, we encountered a young man with two female companions stumbling along the sidewalk. It was apparent they had been over-served. The man shouted into his cell phone as the ladies laughed at either his tone or drunken antics. I turned on my spider sense waiting for the worst. The young man approached me.

“Hey bloke, cud’ya tell me w’ere ta hell I am?” he spurted out.

“Portrush,” I said.

“Didya ‘ear tha’? I’m in bloody Portrush,” he yelled into his phone.

With that the girls laughed wildly as the fella sat down on the sidewalk. It was the only noise being made in the whole town. We left the three behind to pursue their alcoholic adventures. In another hundred yards we came upon Rachel’s.

“What do say about a nightcap?” RB offered.

Standing in front of Don Giovanni’s, directly across from our rooms we spied the Springhill bar, one door down from Don’s. The lights were on.

“Cmon, we’ll have one Guinness and call it a night.”

“Whatever,” JJ replied with little enthusiasm.

As we entered the bar, it became apparent it was not family night. This crowd looked a little long in the tooth. I imagine some of Northern Ireland's finest rabble-rousers sat among the stools sizing up four clueless Americans. RB made his way to the bar ordering four pints. Doug, JJ, and I stood at a raised table making small talk while observing the festivities. RB delivered the drinks.

"Cheers," he announced. "Did ya think we'd be in this place tonight?"
"Never knew it was here," JJ replied. "At least it's close. I can crawl home."

We clanged our pints together sampling the stout. I glanced at the TV's showing football highlights, sipping my nightcap. One minute RB was holding court; the next minute a commotion grabbed the attention of all the patrons except me. It seemed one fellow had fallen prey to Irish whiskey proceeding to do a couch dance of sorts across the upholstered seats adjoining the far wall. The crowd control manager quickly grabbed the prancing drunk escorting him out the front door. Doug, RB and JJ stood there with blank looks on their faces. I stood there clueless as usual.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Didn't you see that?" RB answered.

"See what?"

"C'mon," RB inquired. "You missed the dance?"

"What dance?" I asked as JJ and Doug stood there laughing.

"That guy just went off," RB described. "He went on a short walk across the joint hopping from booth to booth."

"Huh?" I questioned.

"Ask Doug and JJ," RB added.

After a few minutes I convinced the other three I missed the whole shindig. They filled me in on the details while we drained our pints. RB said it must have been this guy's time to literally fly the coop. He flapped his arms as he hopped up on the seats. Doug and JJ continued to snicker at the event. In a way I felt left out. This kind of episode would be a running joke for the rest of the trip.

"I can't believe I missed that," I confessed. "Must have had my back turned at a precise angle."

"It was a show," Doug admitted.

To say the day had come full circle would not have done it justice. Golf in a downpour, the ferry ride, Johnny Cash in a Chinese restaurant, the drunk along the sidewalk, a couch dancer, the \$160.00 rain hat, I'm sure I'm missing a few items but it had been a full twenty-three hours. Yet these encounters would be remembered the rest of our lives. One day in the near future I envisioned the four of us reuniting on a course as we retold some of the stories from our first Irish excursion.

PORTSTEWART – INTO THE WIND

Monday morning came far too early. I lay under the covers pondering the day's events. It felt a bit chilly in my room as I regained my senses. Hmm, that meant we might be in for another weather challenge at Portstewart. No problem, I figured. I packed a bunch of all-weather gear for the trip. Cold? Rainy? Bring it on I mumbled to myself entering the shower. It would be the last time I was truly warm that Monday.

I negotiated the narrow stairway leading to the first floor with a couple of added aches and pains compliments of Ballyliffin. Limping into the breakfast room I hoped to enjoy the same Irish breakfast as the day before. I looked out the bay window into a gloomy rain accompanied by a stiff wind. A few minutes later the others wandered in looking pensively at the conditions outside.

"Ere ya are boys. Sometin' ta get yer day started," came Rachael's breakfast greeting. "Rachael, what happened to the sunny and 70 forecast you promised?" Doug started. Rachael chuckled at Doug's playful attitude returning to the kitchen to bring us more food.

"I think we're in for a day," I surmised. "Man, some guy was sawing serious wood last night. I thought he was sleeping next to me."

"You should be so lucky," Doug offered.

"The walls are kinda thin," RB observed.

"I had to turn the bathroom fan on to drown him out. Oh well, maybe I can catch a nap this afternoon."

"Nap!?" came the objections followed by a few laughs.

"Wonder how the "birdman" slept last night?" JJ said, referring to the incident at the Springhill pub.

"How 'bout where? Think he grabbed some pavement RB?" Doug contributed.

"Maybe he caught up with the other threesome," RB guessed.

We continued to inhale Rachael's wonderful assortment of breakfast items. An occasional wind gust rattled the large windows. It looked ugly outside. If I were back in the states I know this would've been a day to hit the snooze. Yet that option didn't exist over here. The time had come to "sack up", point my nose into the gale and slash that white adversary around God's green Irish turf. How bad could it be?

By the time we arrived at Portstewart the wind had freshened a bit and was now capable of blowing any remaining hair off RB's noggin. The surrounding topography lacked any wind blocking trees that might assist us in our quest. Only by weaving in and out of the dunes would we find any respite. An umbrella would be added weight today.

I layered up my waterproofs topped by my traditional Illini stocking cap along with cart gloves, rain gloves, plus a do-or-die attitude. I set my bag down prior to heading into the golf shop for one last chance at refuge. Immediately the gale knocked it down like a weak layup. It stayed down.

The friendly woman who greeted us two days earlier sat behind the counter perhaps wondering if we were going to attempt it.

“A’bit breezy oot t’day?” she began.

“Anybody out there?” RB questioned.

“A cup’la fellas but I doot we’ll have many more wit dis win’,” she confided.

“Well, we’re goin’,” RB announced. “We don’t have anything else to do.”

“If tha’s the case I’ll make ya a deal,” the woman replied.

Indeed she only charged us for two fees. Out we went to tackle the elements. It seemed as if the wind knew we were coming as the gusts came at us with a heartier pace.

Years earlier at Prestwick, I remember playing five holes in a tempest that ultimately rendered the game as one of just making contact with the ball. Here, standing on the first tee at Portstewart, the winds accelerated to a pace that made Prestwick’s conditions look like a mere sea breeze. Standing up to hit the first shot became a formidable task. With my eyes watering, my jacket flapping loudly like a baseball card in the spokes of a youngster’s bicycle wheel, I assembled the other three to face me in order to act as a human windbreak. I bunted my tee shot down the hill towards the first green. The others proceeded in the same fashion just attempting to get their ball off the tee. There would be no cigars today.

The first hole on Portstewart’s Strand course is a marvelous downhill par four that drops one hundred feet to the fairway. One a calm day it would be a joy to launch a towering drive against a blue Irish sky watching the ball float down to the landing area. That opportunity would not avail itself on this trip, perhaps never again. Getting off the tee today was a survival contest. With our heads down and our collars up we shuffled down the hill towards the first green. If you could call it a bright spot the fact we were now amongst tall dunes helping to divert the gusts from a full frontal attack provided us some brief shelter. I bogied the hole -- a triumph in itself. Making our way to the second tee the rain came back to toy with us. For the next few holes a wet, windblown links experience battered our foursome.

Everything we read about the opening nine proved accurate. The routing of the holes through the dunes was brilliantly choreographed. Hole five, a stunning par four featured an elevated tee leading to the bumpy fairway, which in turn rose to a high green tucked into the dunes. Perhaps the funniest story of the day occurred at the following hole, a mid-length par three. Once again the rains commenced but this time with an added feature. JJ and RB stood huddled by the flagstick as I putted out.

“That rain is starting to sting my face,” RB quipped.

“That’s because it’s ice!” JJ hollered.

Sure enough we now had to battle a bit of sleet. On the eighth, a downhill, dogleg left par four I faced a second shot of 180 yards. Turning back into the staunch breeze club selection was relatively simple – a full bore three wood. I hit a brilliant shot up into the elements expecting it to land vertically on the green like a butterfly with sore feet. It kept going and going landing some thirty yards behind the birthday cake green near the first

fairway. I simply killed it. The breeze took a momentary break. Unfortunately it led to another bogey.

The ninth hole led us back up the ridge we had just traveled down, doglegging around a massive bunker with a vertical face of long fescue. Hideous is the best way to describe it. You could have buried an Airbus in the stuff. Naturally I hit my ball towards the sandy beast and never found it. It may have been a blessing.

Portstewart's back nine falls short in comparison to its outward nine. Running along the same land as the River course, it lacks the dunes and lumpiness that defines the first nine. The holes aren't bad, it's just they don't share the same thrill ride. Holes sixteen and eighteen ran back up a gradual rise to the clubhouse. With the wind off the Atlantic both par fours were unreachable. Back-to-back par fives make the final routing interesting but the best collection of holes were found on the opening nine.

In spite of the weather (we later discovered winds had gusted to over 50 mph) I enjoyed the course and would love to play it again. It was a tale of two cities, so to speak. The closing nine featured terrain dotted with cookie-cutter bunkers swallowing any ball trying to skirt the hazards. Balls rolled subtly towards these depressions as if being drawn by a tidal force. I also enjoyed peering into the shelters dug into the sides of the dunes. Barely wide enough to fit four players I suspect they were only necessary if lightning, monsoons, or hurricane winds frequented the grounds. Undoubtedly I would venture to say some lasses may have lost their crown jewels in such remote locations. Hopefully the amorous lad brought a blanket plus a nip of whiskey.

Upon holing out we dragged our equipment, our bodies plus what was left of our spirit to the van. By now the sleet was only an afterthought. The rains also disappeared but the wind continued to blow sternly off the water. Patches of sunlight shone periodically but they didn't produce much warmth. I peeled off my stocking cap rubbing my head vigorously in an attempt to establish blood flow. Wow! What had we just gone through?

"Should we get a drink here?" RB inquired.
The carpark contained four other vehicles.

"I'll take a look inside," I offered.
"Food!" JJ yelled. "I need food!"

After a quick look inside I determined better options might lie in town.

"Let's go into town and grab something," I suggested. "It's dead in there."

I hopped in the Renault. The warmth emanating from the black vinyl seat soothed my sore joints. RB pulled out of the carpark, made it into the far lane heading down the hill to the village of Portstewart.

"Quite the round, huh?" RB proffered.

“Survival at its finest,” I responded.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever played eighteen holes in wind like that,” JJ wondered.

“How ‘bout the sleet?” RB asked.

“Remember that Pro-Pro we played in at Mt Prospect when it was sleeting, RB?” I recollected.

“That’s the one where you threw your putter into the bottom of my bag?” RB replied.

“Haigs never throws a club but has a meltdown and twirls one towards my clubs.”

“That was it. It looked like you had an antenna sticking out the bottom of your bag,” I laughed.

“It was colder that day,” RB replied.

“Less wind,” I added.

“Not much sleet in Atlanta this time of year,” Doug weighed in.

We found a parking spot along the shoreline in the village. Waves continued their beautiful display of power crashing along the rocks. A sparse crowd roamed the main sidewalk lined by storefronts, offices and an occasional eating establishment. It didn’t take long to survey the place. Within five minutes we were comfortably seated in a sandwich shop.

“My head is sore from being battered around by that wind,” I admitted. “It’s nice to sit inside away from the weather.”

“Maybe it’s the hat-head,” Doug joked.

“Hey, you’re talkin’ about your alma mater,” I countered referring to my Illini cap.

“I’m in need of food,” JJ asserted. “Goin’ for some chips again RB?”

“You got it JJ,” RB agreed.

Minutes later we plunged into a variety of sandwiches and chips along with an adequate supply of red sauce. It may have been the best meal of the week. Not in terms of quality but rather the fact of one’s body requiring nourishment. Finished, I sat there wondering what to do the rest of the day. A nap seemed likely.

“Since we’ve got a bit of time I think I’ll window shop for some gifts,” I initiated.

“Looks like they’ve got a few tourist traps here.”

“Good idea,” RB agreed.

For the next hour or so the four of us switched from golfers to tourists. We cruised the street agreeing to meet back at the van after dropping a few Euros. I grabbed a few things for the kids. The shopkeepers were cheery with their song-song Irish accents asking if they could be of help. My prize purchase included a leprechaun for Ryan. I didn’t know if he’d realize where I had been, but maybe the little green fella would help remind him.

Back at the van Doug and JJ were seated in the back seat avoiding the elements. Although the sun peeked out from the white puffs of fast moving clouds, the wind continued to blow uncontested. Finally RB showed up.

“Ready to go?” RB asked.

“Yep, let’s head back,” I agreed.

“Nap time!” JJ confirmed.

“Great idea,” Doug reaffirmed.

“You guys aren’t up for a little sightseeing?” RB inquired.

A heavy silence followed the question. I could’ve gone either way. A nap did sound nice though.

“C’mon let’s check out the place. Haigs, how far is that Bushmills distillery?”

“Maybe twenty minutes up the road, RB.”

“Just take me back to Rachel’s,” JJ said. “I am a hurtin’ hatter.”

Within ten minutes we dropped Doug and JJ back at the ranch and took off for points east. The A2 road travels along high jagged cliffs on its way to Bushmills. It passes directly by the Portrush Golf Club, tomorrow’s venue, as well as the public access point for the Giant’s Causeway, a quaint outpost established by the National Trust. Call it an Irish national park. We would eventually make our way there to see what the commotion was all about at this site. First we stopped at a scenic overlook carpark to take in some incredible ocean views. The unabated gale nearly blew my ears off. Sea foam blew up to the road from a hundred feet below as wind pounded the sea into the cliffs. I could barely hear RB over nature’s roar. After grabbing a few pictures we retreated to the shelter of the van.

“Wow! We played golf in that stuff?” RB exclaimed.

“I don’t know if you would call it golf but we were in it. The constant force of that wind is unreal,” I shot back. “You could lean into it and not fall over.”

“Great view huh Haigs?”

“Spectacular,” I replied looking out towards the Arctic Circle.

A few minutes later we drove into the carpark of the Giants Causeway. We determined the six-pound parking fee would be worth the experience. I had no idea what to expect. As we toured the small clapboard shops, we began to get a feel for the place. A history of the area was spelled out in one room with maps of the walking trails displayed on dark paneled walls. Eventually we navigated a downhill path to the shore in order to see the volcanic rock formations unique to this site.

“I don’t mind the walk down RB, but the hike back up is gonna be a bitch,” I observed.

Granted the walk down traversed a steep grade featuring a crushed stone-walking path with a narrow paved road for a shuttle bus. The water lay off to our left. Towering headlands flanked our right. It reminded me of some scenes from the movie *Lord of the Rings*. Rugged, natural, a myriad of colors, the complete setting did not disappoint.

“Pretty cool place?” I mentioned putting my hands in the pockets of my windbreaker.

“This is wild,” RB commented as we walked down the steep grade.

We arrived at the bottom of the hill, a half-mile from our starting point, hundreds of feet below the shops, milling about with other tourists who felt this was the place to be. The

wind continued to whip the northern coastline depositing sea spray on those close to the shoreline. Finally we came upon the famous rock formations jutting out of the rocky shore.

“What do ya think of that, RB?”

He stood there looking at rock columns of various heights.

“Never seen anything like this before. Never saw any of this in Decatur, huh?” RB said jokingly.

This is kinda strange.” I replied. “How the heck did these things get this way?”

“Obviously it was the giants,” RB replied like a naïve kid. “It’s their causeway isn’t it?”

“Ya know, I’d expect that kind of comment from Doug but not from a man of your intelligence,”

“Once again you have erred,” RB laughed.

Indeed I had never seen these types of rock formations. Some were square, others, hexagonal, each of various heights, some as tall as four or five feet. People walked across them dodging waves as they rolled in. Children laughed as they played tag hopping up and down the stone steps. Obviously they did not clutter their minds with the questions I pondered – How did these stones get here? How were they formed? Did they simply rise up out of the ocean in assorted shapes? I had no answers, especially at this point in the day. My battered mind floated somewhere along the gale back at Portstewart.

“I think this is it, RB,” I said in an attempt to begin our journey back up the hill.

“Wait a minute. What’s over there?” he asked. “Though that doorway of sorts?”

He pointed to a pathway between the rocks. We ventured over to the area. As we walked through the opening we discovered another expanse of water pounding the jagged coastline. Layered shale stacked on the headlands displayed an incredible array of color as the sunlight flashed across it. Another great view but at this point I wasn’t walking another five hundred yards to look at more rocks.

“C’mon, RB. We’ve gotta get up that hill.”

The best way I’ve found for tackling such a task is to not be fixated on the summit. It defeats the spirit. Rather, focus on the immediate ground in front of you, proceed step by step, then stop and turn around to measure your progress. Eventually you’ll be further along than you thought possible. It took perhaps twenty minutes to climb the hill, the steepest challenge coming at the end.

“Whoa, that was some par five. Hang on pal, my head is pounding,” I said to RB.

“Don’t worry, I’m looking for a little air too. Brutal climb,” RB agreed.

“Good thing we have that afternoon time tomorrow,” I tried to look on the bright side.

“I’ll need a few additional minutes of sack time.”

Again the van served as a welcome easy chair. Aching legs dangled from my familiar seat as I looked out at a place I would most likely never visit again. The wind blew across my face as the sun fell through the late afternoon sky. I wheeled around in my

seat, shutting the passenger door. Once again we were on the move, this time to the Bushmills Inn.

RB drove the van into the village of Bushmills where we encountered an intersection rather than the typical traffic circle. To our right, down the main street, sat the world-famous distillery. Turning left, one would find the Bushmills Inn. At the present hour it was doubtful the distillery would still allow visitors. We turned left, found the carpark continuing on our adventure.

The Bushmills Inn occupied a white two-story building along the main road. No doubt you may have seen the Inn's pedigree – it has received numerous awards since renovating the old Coaching Inn and Mill House back in 1987. For these exact reasons we didn't opt to reserve rooms at Bushmills. The cost was prohibitive. Rather our main expense on this trip was to be allocated to the golf properties.

The main entrance led us to a cozy reception area dressed in oak. It featured a reservation desk for the staff, a few wooden cocktail tables plus an inviting couch placed in front of a farmhouse-style fireplace. An understated stairway led to the second floor rooms as well as a sitting area. A few people milled around perhaps in anticipation of an early supper. Unfortunately the couch was occupied.

After the wind's brutal beating during the morning round I began to feel more human within the confines of the Inn's décor.

"Nice place huh, RB?"

"Should have stayed here, ya think?" RB replied.

"Do they have an hourly rate?" I joked. "Let's see if we can find a drink."

Apparently the dining room was not ready to open. Servers were busy in preparation for their evening's guests. That also meant the dining room bar was closed. I asked one of the staff if we possibly could get a drink. We were informed the "Gas" bar, located in the front of the inn, would be open shortly. After directing us to its locale, RB and I stood in a darkened, cozy bar adorned in antique wood paneling. The room represented an earlier, unhurried era where one could thoroughly enjoy the warmth of an Irish whiskey on a brisk day. The late afternoon sunlight filtered through small windows creating a shadowy, intriguing feel.

"What do you think of this, RB?" I asked as if I'd found the Promised Land.

"Haigs, how would you like to put this place at your favorite course back home?"

"Couldn't be done," I quipped. "Unless you'd put it say, at the National Golf Links or some shrine dripping with tradition. Not many clubhouses could accommodate such a setting."

The room served as a reminder of how priceless time is. Through all the attempts to modernize our surroundings too often we destroy settings that are tributes to a simpler, more comfortable period. Ironically, it seems these days many locales are attempting to recreate this wonderful old ambience but tend to come up a bit short. Most notably many

of the new baseball stadiums are now called “ballparks”. Their quirky angles combined with nostalgic facades can’t match Fenway or Wrigley. When those two parks are raised lock the door behind you.

We sat at a small table in antique wooden armchairs soaking up the history of the inn while also resting our bodies. The trip around a heaving Portstewart combined with the jaunt down and then back up the Giant’s Causeway proved to be a rigorous adventure. It had been a very full day. I wished JJ and Doug were along. Their commentary would have added significantly to our excursion. However I understood their need for a little R&R back at Rachel’s.

“Whadya men be ‘avin?” asked the sturdy looking man from behind the bar.
“RB?”
“Guinness,” came his reply.

I walked to the bar to ask about the Bushmill’s offerings of Irish whiskeys.
“Have ya ha’ th’ Blackbush atal?”
“Can’t say I’ve had the pleasure,” I answered.
“Lemme pour ya a nip.”

I took a sip of the whiskey. Trickling down my throat it left a warm trail behind. It wasn’t as bold as some of the single malts I experienced in Scotland.

“Let’s go with that,” I advised. “And a pint of Guinness for my buddy.”
“Excellent! Enj’ yo’selves an if ya need anything, lemme know.”

Grabbing the drinks I moved back towards the table where RB had set up shop.
“Here’s to a full day,” I toasted. “And a warm pub.”

We clanked our glasses together enjoying the Bushmills moment. The captivating warmth of the old inn was deposited in the memory banks. I wondered who had sat here before and what type of stories they told. No doubt several golfers had been through this place and discussed their triumphs and tragedies.

“Good to leave the real world behind for awhile, huh?” I reflected.
“I know I love my family and everything but geez Haigs, this is priceless.”
“Yeah, by the way, happy birthday,” I said, raising my glass one more time.
“We made it to the back nine my friend,” RB countered.
“Where do we go next?” I inquired.
“Not now Haigs. Let’s just soak this up,” RB advised.

As we relaxed with a few stories of our own, two women, a mother and daughter entered the room. We greeted them later discovering they were from northern California. The daughter actually worked at a private club close to Santa Cruz. She and RB compared notes as I sipped my whiskey. The casual conversation further enhanced the relaxed atmosphere of the old pub. I could’ve stayed there for the rest of the trip.

As the fading light dripped through the windows, we finished our drinks deciding to head back to Rachel's. There's no telling what JJ and Doug had gotten into.

"Well we might be a bit more tired than Doug and JJ but at least we saw a piece of Ireland," I admitted.

"I wonder where that walking bridge was?" RB wondered.

"Great day to be swinging across that thing with this wind, huh?" I assessed.

RB was referring to the Carrick-a-Rede Bridge outside of Portrush. Reportedly the rope bridge suspended between two cliffs traversed a rocky inlet, perfect for my fear of heights. But on this day the bridge would not be a part of our excursion. The shot of Blackbush began to work its way through my system. I needed a comfy chair.

We caught up with our two playing partners holding court in the guesthouse sitting room with a twelve pack of beer plus eight golfers from various locations in California and Oregon. Naturally Doug led the conversation regarding a congressman who had been nabbed in a Minneapolis airport restroom soliciting another man for a sexual favor. The laughter surrounding Doug's rendition of the event poured out of the small parlor. He held the audience in the palm of his hand as usual. JJ sat in a chair laughing with the others at Doug's reference to a shopping bag scenario.

"You know, if the guy would've had the shopping bag he'd have been OK," Doug orated.

"All you gotta do is step in the thing and if someone peeks under, well, all you see are two legs and a bag."

With this final delivery the room burst open with sinister laughter. I could feel my eyes tearing up from laughing so hard. Doug stood there matter-of-factly as if he'd just recited an axiom from the Sexual Deviants Handbook. The group from the western US got a kick out of the story. After the hilarity died down, RB and I had a chance to introduce ourselves. The group played at Portrush earlier in the day. Despite the trying weather they assured us we would enjoy playing the course. A few minutes later the room occupied only the four of us and two cans of beer. Our western friends departed for dinner.

"I think the one guy was taking notes, huh JJ?" Doug observed.

With that we broke out again.

"Don't ask, don't tell," I reminded Doug.

"What's for dinner?" RB asked.

"We gotta hit that place we went past last night," Doug kidded. "The fish and chips joint."

"Let's go," I agreed. "I'm ready for food."

A couple of blocks up from the guesthouse sat a fast food storefront specializing in that unique UK staple, fish and chips. Inside a young man, mid twenties or so stood in front

of three fryers with noisy exhaust fans running above. A couple of plastic booths, painted in red and blue sat against the wall, unoccupied. We placed four orders to go.

“How many stars do we give this joint?” Doug asked under his breath.

We grabbed the food, walked out of Mr. Fish and Chips, and strolled back to Rachel’s. We reconvened in the sitting room gnawing on heavily breaded fish and fries. The fries tasted OK. I wasn’t convinced about the fish. It needed a bunch of tartar sauce.

“Not five star,” RB quipped

“I don’t think he used enough breading,” Doug sarcastically replied.

It was hard to tell where the breading ended and the fish began.

“Fries are OK,” RB countered. He loved his French fries.

We sat there stuffing ourselves with grease, breading, and from what I could tell was a limited offering of whitefish. Washing it down with warm beer capped off the meal. After a day that seemed to contain thirty-six hours it became apparent four tired, middle-aged Americans were destined for early retirement. With Royal Portrush on tomorrow’s agenda a good night’s rest would soothe some of the aches inflicted by the lashing Irish winds. Hopefully it would be calmer the next morning. Hopefully the guest snoring the night before would be sleeping on his side.

ROYAL PORTRUSH

Our afternoon starting time at Royal Portrush afforded us a leisurely morning at Rachel’s. I slept in a bit longer, enjoyed a warm shower and re-inventoried my wardrobe in anticipation of the next few days travel. Breakfast, as usual, was superb. It would be difficult to leave Rachel’s place. Her five-star hospitality defined our stay in Portrush.

With a few hours to burn before heading over to the club, I visited the town library a few doors down. Once again the “quaintness” of the village stood out. A vehicle wasn’t required to access most of the places of necessity. Portrush had been built on a peninsula jutting north into the sea. A couple of main roads ran through the town and if you missed a location you simply made another loop around the place. In reality you could walk around the place in thirty minutes.

The modest library occupied a small, two-story grayish building on the same side of the street as the guesthouse. Inside a few stacks displayed various volumes while one side of the room had been outfitted with PC’s. The walls were dressed in a sage green color with white baseboard trim. I approached the librarian to inquire about gaining access to one of the computers. It turned out I could grab an hour of time for less than a pound.

Cruising the world-wide-web it appeared not much had changed since I left home. Tiger won the Tour Championship, my St. Louis Cardinals were hanging around the top of

their division, financial markets were holding their own and the temps in Green Bay hovered around seventy-five. For this brief moment I'd stepped back into my world, thinking I had missed something when in actuality, I had missed very little. After returning a few e-mails I decided to slip back into my state of Irish anonymity.

Leaving the library behind, I journeyed into town to stretch my legs. Fortunately the winds from yesterday subsided. Although the sky lacked any significant sunlight it looked to be a better day ahead. After a few blocks of peeking through storefront windows, I did an about-face and returned to Rachel's.

Within a few minutes the fearless four assembled their belongings near the van for the five minute trip to Royal Portrush.

"Now that was a morning I sorely needed," RB announced.

"How's your face today?" JJ asked.

"Ugly and funny looking," Doug piled on.

"Actually the sleet might have taken off a few years. It's been awhile since I played in fifty mile per hour sleet. It was like getting sandblasted, actually ice blasted," RB observed.

"Kinda like Varley's Mr. Freeze act, huh?" I added.

"Memorable," RB asserted.

By the time we finished dishing out barbs, RB successfully pulled into the carpark at the Royal Portrush Golf Club. Our afternoon time, while fortunate, resulted from the club's rules regarding unaccompanied guests. It allowed time to peruse the clubhouse, pick up a souvenir, as well as grab a sandwich prior to going out. In order to enter the clubhouse we were required to ring in to an intercom and identify our foursome. Apparently this helped control snooping by the casual golf tourist who chose not to play the course. The lock on the large wood doors released and we were granted access to one of Ireland's most reputable clubs.

The main hallway of the facility was lined with several trophy cases displaying timeless memorabilia. Dripping with an impressive resume of golf history, Portrush has been considered by many players as one of the finest courses in the world. It is the only course to have hosted an Open Championship away from the UK mainland. Harry Colt did some of his finest design work along the Causeway Coast fashioning holes from superb, rolling linksland. To say I was excited about playing the course would have been an understatement.

As we slowly made our way down the hall examining the trophies and medals, it became crystal clear how young the game is in America. We stood there gawking at items from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The modern clubhouse may have appeared a bit untraditional but once inside the tradition seeped out through the trophy cases.

"This is quite a collection. Look at some of this old stuff Haigs," RB commented.

"Quite impressive," JJ summarized.

"What do you know about this Fred Daly guy?" I asked.

“I don’t think he was a relative of John,” JJ laughed.

We read several pieces about the only Irishman until Pádraig Harrington to win the Open Championship. Daly grew up in Portrush and undoubtedly made a bit of history in the golf world with his Open victory in 1947 at Hoylake.

“It appears as if the game’s traditions are well preserved at Portrush,” I noted. “How did these guys shoot those kind of scores with this type of equipment?” Doug asked pointing at an old rut iron. “Hey RB, look at this thing.”

The articles included in the displays surely qualified the place as a “mini” golf museum. While the building itself featured modern amenities, the membership undertook splendid efforts to preserve old trophies and artifacts, displaying them to players of current times. I thoroughly enjoyed the brief history lesson. It verified why the club is so well thought of by European players.

The grillroom occupied the second story of the clubhouse offering a panorama of both courses. The room featured a long oak bar, a few upholstered chairs awaiting weary golfers, a fireplace and various size table offerings. Actually I felt the room was too one-dimensional. Yet the view made up for it. It was as if you were standing on the bridge of a ship. We sat down at a small oak table overlooking the first fairway. As there was still a chill to the outside air, I selected a soup and sandwich combo. Hopefully the soup would stick to my ribs for a few holes. After yesterday’s survival contest, I brought every article of outdoor gear with me.

As usual we received a few looks from a couple of the members. Yes, we were Americans. Yes, we were guests. Yes, we were quiet and reserved while eating our lunches. I suppose the same examination occurs at American clubs. However, at most clubs in the states its unlikely you would ever get through the front door without being accompanied by a member.

“No sleet today, RB,” I assured.

“I’m just happy the wind isn’t blowing like yesterday,” RB replied.

“It felt like my face was being ripped off,” I said.

“Might be a better look for you,” Doug suggested. “Hey RB, think you can bring it home in par today?”

“I’m thinking of just bringing it home. This body hasn’t carried this many days in row for awhile,” RB half kidded.

JJ laughed. “I’m about ready for a trolley guvna.”

“You two didn’t go on the safari ride yesterday afternoon. You should be feelin’ OK.” I acclaimed.

“Yeah, you should have seen this monster hill we had to climb up. It was brutal,” RB added.

The discussion about nothing in particular continued during the meal. Occasionally I glanced out the window watching groups venture down the first fairway. One fella rolled out solo in a cart enclosed with a buggy cover. Doug spotted the event. "Obviously playing with all his friends," he observed.

The lone combatant negotiated the slope fronting the first green, putted out and was never seen again.

With our lunches safely tucked into our middle-aged bellies, the time had come to make our way to the first tee. Sticking with the "no range balls" routine I opted for a few rolls on the putting green. The afternoon weather consisted of a grey ceiling, a brief spit of moisture combined with a manageable breeze. Coming from the warm confines of the clubhouse I felt a slight chill nestle in my hands as they rested on the putter. A few strokes later it spread into the warm areas of my arms making me wonder if another layer was required.

One guest group was scheduled to tee off before us. Collecting our clubs, the four of us walked to the first tee trying to fit in. Normally I would have liked to give the guys the ole Flounder line from Animal House. You know the one at the end when the Delta's are about to sabotage the homecoming parade. Flounder, with his teeth clenched, yells out "This is gonna be great!" and starts jumping up and down. Perhaps if we were members of Monty Python that may have been acceptable but instead I kept quiet and gazed down the green ribbon of the first fairway.

The opening hole at Portrush is a straightaway par four that rises gently to an undulating green. White stakes defining out of bounds border both sides of the fairway. About twenty yards in front of the green lay a nasty bunker, potentially swallowing any weak approach to the elevated putting surface. In fact after reaching the green, I discovered it wasn't out of the realm of possibility to putt a ball off the front of the green down the hill into the mouth of the diabolical hazard.

The four of us found the fairway with our drives, a rarity on this trip. Unbeknownst to us at the time, this would JJ's best day of ball striking and he would record the low round of the day, seventy-six. Also of note was the fact this was Doug's birthday. We would later acknowledge the coincidence that although Doug may have aged another year, he hadn't completely grown up. None of us had.

We completed the opener and turned north towards the Atlantic. The second hole, a moderate par five sent RB on a journey westward through the fescue as the rest of us managed to stick near the fairway. Playing downwind I managed to knock my second shot on the putting surface. The resulting par left a sour taste in my mouth. Following the par three third, the routing would continue to press us to the sea and then turn us back towards the clubhouse. A light mist encouraged by a persistent breeze accompanied us on our walk.

It would be impossible not to admire this wonderful links. From an aesthetic standpoint the verdant fairways spilling down to the deep blue sea offered a spectacular view of the northern Irish coast, the one RB and me explored the day before driving down the A2. Golfers are treated to a sight of the continuous battle raging between the rugged cliffs and pounding waves. Standing on the tee at the par three sixth I couldn't help spending an extra moment gazing at the once-in-a-lifetime view. Nature had painted a masterpiece in this part of the world. Fortunately a worthy links course allowed its players a grand view in this glorious setting.

For the most part we all were playing fairly well, no "others" invaded the scoring column. JJ and I held our own in a four-ball match against Doug and RB. That is until we encountered the eighth hole.

Number eight at Royal Portrush is a dogleg right of three hundred and eighty yards. Recessed between dunes and moguls, the ribbon of fairway creeps randomly towards a tight putting surface stretching some forty yards tucked in the dunes. The key to the hole is to avoid temptation at cutting the dogleg as the fairway narrows upon its approach to the green. The prudent play is for a hybrid or fairway wood down the left side and then attack the putting surface with a short iron. Notice I did mention the word "prudent". The concept did not apply in this case to RB.

"Looks like you can cut this one a bit," RB tempted himself.

"I say play to what is in front of you," I offered.

"Go for it, RB!" Doug baited.

As the headcover came off the Callaway driver, JJ, Doug and I rolled our eyes knowing the chances of hitting the perfect tee ball were miniscule.

"He's gonna hit it isn't he guv?" JJ whispered to me.

"Oh yeah. Just watch." I replied softly.

Calling for a high draw to safely deposit the ball in fifteen yards of fairway, the ball instead shot off the titanium face streaking in the opposite direction towards a no-mans-land of humps, gorse and fescue.

"Dammit!" RB yelled hoping it would force the ball flight back in the vicinity of the eighth fairway. "Can you frickin' believe that!?"

"See it all the time," Doug deadpanned.

JJ and I grabbed our bags, took a deep breath, and strolled off the tee. RB headed off at a forty-five degree angle amongst the dunescape muttering obscenities.

"Think he'll find it?" JJ laughed as we walked down the proper route of the hole.

"I doubt it but I think the open space and a bit of air will do him good," I said.

"Kinda funny to see him like that," JJ added.

“Well he thought he had a better idea plus he felt like he was twenty-one again. He was grindin’ but it didn’t quite work out,” I explained. “Trust me there was a time when RB could hit that shot.”

“Juuuuust a bit outside,” JJ said referencing a Bob Uecker line from the movie Major League. We broke out laughing at RB’s expense.

As we walked along we caught an occasional outburst of profanity emanating from the dunes. RB was nowhere in sight but we knew his exact location. Eventually we rendezvoused back at the green having learned RB indeed found his errant tee ball managing to chop his way home. His profane rant subsided; RB actually sported a smile on his weary face.

“I wouldn’t advise that route,” RB kidded.

“You actually found your ball?” JJ asked.

“Gouged it out of the fescue. Thought I could get it back on the fairway. I was wrong,” RB conceded.

After putting out, the four of us looked back up the fairway, three of us having opted for the proper play, RB going all out for a failed attempt at glory. No matter, the next hole would do me in as well.

The ninth hole ran back towards the first green, a subtle dogleg right with the harrowing rough RB had just experienced on the previous hole off to our right. Naturally that was my line of play. Up until that point my round stayed respectable but now it was about to unravel like the core of an old wound Titleist. I double bogied what turned out to be a marvelous hole for someone who played it properly, like JJ. The first of back-to-back par fives, number nine represented the sterner of the two holes. Framed by dunes, fescue, gorse and other obstacles, its serpentine fairway cut a path south away from the ocean to a rumpled green tucked into protective moguls. The tenth ran back west along large dunes that obscured the first fairway but offered a bit more room to accommodate my wayward driver.

Walking down the tenth fairway towards the green JJ stated with a bit of local accent, “That was a fairly decent nine holes of golf, wouldn’t ye say?”

“Stronger than a garlic milkshake,” quipped RB. “Eight was REAL special.”

The other three of us laughed at RB sticking the needle in himself.

“You might need just a little local knowledge before you pull something off back here,” Doug warned.

“Go ahead,” I encouraged. “JJ and I are still up!”

Indeed we were which was a bit of a surprise. JJ continued to play steady while I had to put it in my pocket on thirteen, a terrific short par four. We continued our excursion of discovery over the links. Fourteen is known as the course’s signature hole, a wicked par three rising 220 yards to a green on top of a dune offering no room for error. I let my partner handle the challenge as I recorded another bogey. The hole did not welcome a weak shot, which is what I offered. The following two holes led to a somewhat disappointing finish over flat terrain – the par five seventeenth and par four eighteenth.

Not that they were bad holes, it's just that the wonderful rolling movement of the grounds had basically run its course as we approached the clubhouse. Fortunately Colt's liberal use of bunkers made it mandatory to keep a ball on the short grass. A fairway bunker on seventeen stood at least twenty-five feet tall prompting Doug to "give it a go". Throwing down a ball in the sand, he whacked a fairway metal over the top of the massive obstruction as the three of us looked on in amazement. It may have been the shot of the trip.

The long home hole ran adjacent to the main road. Dotted by bunkers leading to a receptive putting surface, the par four demanded two solid blows. Upon my approach to the eighteenth green I heard a familiar but yet strange sound coming from near the clubhouse. I tapped in for my double then looked for the source. Thirty yards away players sprayed the soles of their shoes with a nozzle shooting compressed air. Never had I seen such a device in the states. It was brilliant.

I walked towards the station, grabbed the hose and sprayed my shoes. It may have been my best effort of the day. Soon after the other three assembled at the hose.

RB, examining the scorecard announced the obvious.

"Doug, we got kicked,"

"Not on my account," I confessed. "It was all my partner."

"Mr. Johns, that was one fine round on one great course," RB announced.

"Ditto," Doug said. "Well played JJ."

"Partner," I said to JJ, "We just took out Decatur's finest. Great playing."

"At least I got that going for me, which is nice," JJ replied, quoting Caddyshack.

Striding towards the golf shop to gather a few souvenirs, we chuckled about the days round. Naturally at this late hour the pros had locked up which disappointed JJ and RB. They assured us when we checked in they would still be open. Fortunately I grabbed a cap beforehand for less than 79 pounds.

"That kinda sucks," JJ evaluated. "I would've liked to have bought something to remind me of the round."

"Well, I'll remember how you played," said RB. "You guys kicked our butts."

"You can grab something at County Down, JJ," I reminded my partner. "Let's go eat and celebrate our victory."

We threw the clubs in the van and headed back to the clubhouse to check out the upstairs bar. Darkness set in quickly. It had been a great day. The rain held off until the seventeenth hole but even then I still saw two women with a small lass venture towards the driving range to get a few swats in. Golf was just a part of life in this territory and weather was just a part of golf.

As we arrived in the bar only a few patrons remained. Again we opted for a window table, the same one we lunched at a few hours before. The bartender, Stephan, granted

our request for four pints of Guinness. Within minutes the bantering commenced with Doug firing the first shot.

“RB, what did you think of that eighth hole?” Doug asked with a straight face. JJ and I about fell on the floor as RB scrambled for a controlled reply.

“I’d play it the same way,” RB shot back confidently.

“You mean you’d make a ten?” Doug chided.

“Shut up Doug,” RB ordered but to no avail.

“It just amazes me,” Doug stated as he directed his observation towards JJ and me, “that someone with fourteen clubs in their bag couldn’t have made a wiser choice.”

Once again JJ and I laughed loudly as RB sat there defenseless. One thing about Doug was his unique ability to insert the needle right between his victim’s eyes.

The discussion and the Guinness continued and before we knew it, our table was the only one with a pulse in the room.

“Stephan, are we keeping you?” RB asked.

“Absolutely not,” he replied.

“Then come over here, sit down and have a pint with us,” RB invited.

“Can’ d’that,” came the reply. “But I c’n engage ‘n conversation.”

The next hour Stephan entertained us in give-and-take about Royal Portrush, the town, Americans, Graeme McDowell, Palmer, Nicklaus, and Dave Marr. From 1995 – 1999 the course hosted the British Senior Open Championship. During that time Stephan worked at the club. He gave us some insight on the participants. Most notably he talked about the class displayed by Dave Marr when he was telecasting for ABC Sports. At the time Marr battled cancer but still managed to do his TV stint as if he felt nothing. Stephan indicated Mr. Marr conducted himself with class, dignity and tremendous form as he fought his battle while working the tournament.

After our final rounds of Guinness we said goodbye to Stephan, thanked him for his warm Irish hospitality and strode into the night. The day at Portrush had been very good. JJ played his best round of the trip allowing us to win our match. Taking down RB and Doug would have garnered substantial odds in Vegas. But we got ‘em. In truth I rode JJ like a rented mule.

RB assumed his position behind the wheel.

“Where would you like to go to dinner on our final night in Portrush?” RB questioned.

“JJ, you decide,” I urged.

“Mr. Fish and Chips?” Doug asked with a snicker.

“Don’s is fine with me. It’s a short walk to bed,” JJ determined.

With that we parked the car behind Rachel’s. In five minutes we secured a table at Don G’s, our favorite Italian restaurant in Portrush. A waitress approached our table.

“We need four Guinness and an order of that garlic bread,” RB requested.

“Water also,” I added.

“Ye w’re he’ te udder night, no?” she asked.

“We were,” acknowledged RB. “I remembered the garlic bread – outstanding!”

“I be ri’ back,” she said making her way to the kitchen.

The wonderful Italian aromas engulfed our table. I love Italian food. It sure beats corned beef and cabbage.

“What time do we tee off tomorrow?” JJ inquired.

“I think about 1:45,” RB guessed.

A moment later the beverages arrived. We toasted the day’s match once again. The three days in Portrush had been extraordinary. Four terrific layouts with three typical days of weather would be tough to beat at our next destination. We were only two days away from our date with Royal County Down. How could this get any better? We would find out in a hurry.

ARDGLASS

On Wednesday morning we paid our respects and fare to Rachel. Her B&B served us well. Having our own rooms seemed like a luxury compared to our previous adventure in Scotland. The individual bathrooms were absolutely wonderful. After another superb breakfast it was time to seek our destiny at Ardglass.

“Rachel, this has been truly wonderful,” I explained. “Thank you so much for putting up with us.”

“Twasn’t tha bad,” she replied tongue-in-cheek.

“I wish I could have a breakfast like that every morning,” RB commented.

“We could leave you here,” Doug mused. “I’m sure Jackie wouldn’t mind.”

“Probably get a job down at Portrush – keeping the shop open an extra hour,” JJ kidded.

All of us shared the joke, Rachel included. With the precision of a New York taxi driver our efforts to load the van took a bit but soon we were on the road. We exited the claustrophobic carpark leaving the Beulah Guest House behind. Doug and JJ were neatly tucked in the back while I navigated RB southeast towards Belfast.

“We’re gonna need gas Haigs,” RB advised.

“Should have enough to get to Belfast, ya think?”

“I think we’re good,” RB replied.

In an hour we found ourselves driving through the suburbs of Belfast. I got us a little off track but we regained our bearings finally arriving at an Irish 7-11 convenience store.

“Fill this thing to the top RB,” I instructed. “We don’t know where we’re going.”

“You guys want something?” Doug asked.

“I’ll take a Diet Coke. RB you want anything?” I asked.

“Doug grab me a Gatorade or something,” RB requested.

Doug and JJ entered the store as RB filled the van. The mid-morning sun played hide-n-seek with a few clouds while the cool breeze reminded us Belfast was not Atlanta. The day held promise. During our rounds in Portrush the sun wasn’t much of a participant. Hopefully we weren’t going to get blown off the east coast of Northern Ireland the next few days.

“Should be a decent day huh Haigs?” RB questioned.

“After the other day at Portstewart we should be able to handle it,” I agreed. “Looking forward to seeing Royal County Down.”

“No doubt,” RB replied. “Although Ardglass looks pretty neat according to their website.”

“I’m sure it will be a good warm-up,” I added.

Doug and JJ returned with our drinks. We hopped back in the van in search of the A-24 heading towards Clough. From there the A-2 would take us north to Ardglass. Little did we know the road would not follow a straight line. After a fifty-minute drive we found ourselves at the roundabout of the A-24, A-25, A-7 and the A-2.

“This is the turn off RB,” came the instruction. “Take the A-2 north.”

“Got it,” RB confirmed.

“So far so good guvna,” JJ encouraged the driver.

“Cozy back there, J?” I asked.

“Not bad except when Doug starts molesting me,” he replied.

“Now you’re getting the hang of it J. Nobody here is off limits,” I confirmed.

The road weaved a bit as we drove through the countryside. Eventually the two-lane road squeezed into a sliver of pavement barely capable of accommodating two passing vehicles. The turns became tighter as our speed dropped to single digits in spots. Stone walls crowded the van into a gauntlet threatening to take off our outside mirrors.

“Geez this is getting’ a lil narrow,” RB broke the silence.

“Very tight fairways,” I replied. “Uh oh, look out.”

Up ahead, negotiating his way through a hairpin turn was a farmer with his hay wagon. No way would we be able to get around the guy on that turn. We stopped the van holding our breath observing the wagon as it came through the turn. Two younger men walked in front of the wagon guiding the farmer along.

“These guys don’t look like golfers,” Doug observed.

“But I bet they know where Ardglass is,” RB shot back.

“Maybe they’re on the maintenance staff,” Doug wondered.
“Whatever they’re on they are messing with our tee time,” RB said impatiently.
“Just like back in Greenville, hey J?” I laughed.
“The roads there are just a bit wider I believe,” JJ responded. “But we have the farmers.”

By the time the agricultural parade made its way past us, RB had some serious driving to do to get us back on schedule. Finally we came upon a rise in the road overlooking the Irish Sea. In the distance we could see the village of Ardglass. Driving into town the course sat on our right with assorted row houses neatly packed together off to our left. The distinctive twelfth century clubhouse, an ancient castle, cast an imposing shadow across the grounds. I’d have to say it was an impressive setting for links golf.

“Doug, run down there and tell ‘em we’re here,” RB ordered as he pulled the van into a parking space.
“For a dollar,” Doug replied walking towards the clubhouse.
“Ten minutes to spare, RB,” JJ observed. “This place looks medieval.”
“Think any bodies are buried under the place?” RB asked
“I could think of worse places,” I offered.

We shoed up, put our bags on our backs walking down the hill towards the golf shop. A young girl, maybe twenty something greeted us cheerfully.

“Ya needn’t worry. I’ll get y’ off th’ tee with no pr’blems,” she assured us.
“Will you hit my first tee shot?” RB played.
“N’tday. I need t’keep an eye on tings,” she countered. “Besides, yer a pro.”
“Now how do you know that?” RB fished.
“Th’look, ya know,” she replied.

True, RB had a few logos going with his outerwear. Plus he did have the look.

“She’s got you pegged RB,” Doug commented.
“A lot of women do, Doug,” I added. “At least they used to in his younger days.”
“Feather Lady?” Doug suggested.
“Let’s not take this any further,” RB relented.
“Let’s go shoot some golfs,” JJ announced. “The sun is out for a change.”

Ardglass Golf Club had its humble beginning in 1896 when a group decided to purchase twenty acres of land. The initial layout featured seven holes. Some years later another land purchase allowed two more holes to be built. It wasn’t until the 1960’s that the club would expand to eighteen holes. In the last fifteen years additional property was acquired allowing for a redesign of the holes around the turn (#’s 9 & 10).

The first tee at Ardglass sits directly in front of the clubhouse much in the way the first tee is set at St Andrews. The front of the tee features medieval stonework arches suggesting one is off to do battle rather than seek relaxation. We took turns grabbing

some photos then headed up the hill to the short par four. Heaving in various directions, the fairway tumbled right to left towards rocky cliffs holding back the sea.

“Quite a setting.” I mentioned to JJ as we climbed the fairway.

“This is great. Hard to believe this place doesn’t receive a bit more publicity,” JJ acknowledged.

“Don’t get too close to those cliffs, Haigs,” RB warned.

“Just lookin’ RB,” I answered. “Look back towards the clubhouse. Is that any good?”

The stunning view treated our senses to a wonderful combination of color plus bumpy linksland topography. It would have been a shame to turn our back on this panorama. The eighteenth green sat off to our left resting on a slope leading to the doorstep of the clubhouse. The first fairway rose up and away from the tee lifting us to a links experience we would later admit was fun, scenic, memorable and at times as difficult as any we had encountered. Going out you sensed the challenge. Coming home you were being welcomed regardless of the score.

The first six holes paralleled the cliffs rising to a flat stretch of holes where the breeze became more noticeable. Depth perception proved to be a challenge as a few greens seemed to float on the background of the Irish Sea. The firm, quick surfaces were a joy to putt. As we ventured through the first eight holes no one was lighting it up. Holes nine through twelve featured two par threes and two par fives. The short holes ran downhill towards the water again demanding tough club selections. The eleventh ran between a gnarly ridge on the left, water on the right, offering a strip of fairway I never did find. By the time I reached fifteen I came up lame with a pulled muscle in my lower back. Hauling the sticks had taken its toll.

“You OK Haigs?” RB noticed

“Something in the back. Can’t rotate but I’ll make it,” I promised.

“Looking forward to a looper tomorrow,” JJ replied.

“Yeah, that might save the trip,” I responded. “Oh to be eighteen again.”

The final par four holes offered great variety. Sixteen demanded two solid strikes. Seventeen offered a short uphill second shot with eighteen daring us to rip drivers in an attempt to reach the putting surface in search of a final birdie.

Standing on the eighteenth tee Doug once again egged RB on.

“I think driver is too much for you RB,” Doug teased. “Just float that three wood in there.”

JJ and I looked at each other with Cheshire grins as RB stepped to the tee with his beloved Callaway driver. Following a quick lash the ball headed down the hill towards the clubhouse, coming to rest right of the green.

“That wasn’t quite what I had in mind,” RB blurted out.

“I don’t know about you guys but I’m runnin’ on empty,” I stated.

“Count me in on that,” JJ confirmed.

“Long day,” Doug confessed. “But this place has exceeded my expectations.”

“Definitely,” we agreed.

After holing out we noticed the shop was still open. Doug grabbed some drinks and candy bars for the rest of us while we examined the possibility for memorabilia. I didn’t find anything to my liking, opting to save my Euros for Royal County Down. We paid our respects to the counter girl, then it was off to Newcastle. There was still ample light to do a drive by of County Down.

“Ready for the road race? We’ll be cruising at fifteen miles per hour depending on livestock, wagons, combines or lorries,” RB announced as he grabbed the wheel.

“Onward,” JJ beckoned. “Let’s find County Down.”

During the planning process JJ’s focus on County Down bordered on the hypnotic. He had to play it. All of the articles he had read plus its reputation fueled the fire in his golf bag. Being able to play the course right after the Walker Cup matches presented an opportunity few players would ever experience. Now we were thirteen hours away from destiny. Tomorrow morning at 8:20 a.m. the four of us would tackle what many considered to be the finest golf course in the world.

“Once we get back to the junction at Clough stay on A-2 and head into Newcastle,” I guided RB.

“Got it,” he replied.

“Where are we staying?” Doug asked.

“Some B&B out in the country,” I answered. “Couldn’t get the place in town I wanted. Should be a better than Ian’s place. A little bit bigger too.”

“You mean we won’t be sleeping two feet from each other?” Doug rambled.

“Nope. The shower might even work,” I hoped out loud.

“What are you guys talking about?” JJ entered the conversation.

“The Crosshill Arms in Scotland,” the three of us replied. “If you ever have a chance, don’t.”

The Crosshill was our second stop in Scotland seven years prior. The rooms were the size of a walk-in closet, the hot water didn’t work, but the tavern attached to the inn provided plenty of interaction with the locals.

“That’s where I slept under the sink in the bathroom,” RB admitted. “Tater had the room rockin’.”

Doug and I laughed loudly at RB’s account of Tater’s snoring ability. On the course Tater was maybe a twelve but in the sack he chased silence from the room.

“God was he loud,” I confirmed. “He could wake up Elvis.”

As the small talk continued we came to the outskirts of Newcastle, a resort town nestled between the Irish Sea and the Mourne Mountains. To our left we could spot the towers of the Slieve Donard, a four-star, seaside hotel overlooking Royal County Down. Most pictures taken from the course usually include the hotel in the background along with the mountains. The view is majestic.

We proceeded down Dundrum Road until we encountered a traffic circle. I knew we were dangerously close to Mecca.

“Go left RB, there, Golflinks Road. That’s gotta take us to County Down,” I pointed.

In two minutes we drove onto the grounds of the proclaimed best links in the world. A few remnants, bleachers and concession stands, remained from the Walker Cup Matches. We climbed out of the van ready to take a look about. My heart pumped a little faster.

“Shop looks closed,” RB observed. “Go figure.”
“Place is dead,” I added.

Indeed the grounds were vacant. Only a few cars sat in the lot. The alabaster clubhouse sat stoically, guarding its surroundings with plenty of windows for surveillance. I walked over towards the range looking over the vastness of the property. Away from the water the ground tumbled and bumped but I later realized this was the Annsley Links, not the Championship course. Doug and JJ made tracks to the eighteenth green. I wandered over to check out the putting surface.

“Look at this,” JJ exclaimed.

“We’re in trouble,” I agreed. The rock hard green with its closely mown contours feeding deep bunkers conjured images of impending disasters.

“Let’s check this out over here,” RB advised as he walked around the clubhouse.

We followed him passing by the par three tenth tee. The push-up ninth green grabbed our attention.

“This is over the top,” RB evaluated. “What do you think Doug?”

Doug responded in his own unique fashion. “It’s not South Side,” he admitted referring to our home club back in Decatur.

“And it never will be,” I concluded. “I can’t get over the firmness of this turf. There’s no way you could find anything like this back home. I like it. This is gonna be some kind of round tomorrow hey JJ?”

“Gonna be some fast conditions,” came his reply.

As we continued our recon mission, no one came out of the clubhouse to inquire about our presence. Perhaps since we were dressed in golf attire any discerning eye might conclude we had just finished our round and wanted one last look. Either way, it was nice to walk the grounds without interruption.

A large area of neatly clipped turf directly behind the ninth green looked to be a putting course of some kind. The undulating ground would have to wait until tomorrow. Walking over to the first tee I looked out over the beach to the right then down the fairway of the opening hole. Several things went through my mind. Here I was standing on the grounds of one of golf's most respected courses. How lucky was I? In addition I thought of how few people get this opportunity in life. My thoughts turned to my son Ryan – he would never be able to appreciate this type of setting. Due to autism he lived in his own world, eating at McDonalds being his greatest thrill. Likewise I'd only be able to tell my other son Ben about this place although I doubt he would "get" it. Finally I realized I'd never get back here in my lifetime and that tomorrow would pass too quickly. All of a sudden, my trance was broken.

"What are looking at?" RB asked.

"Just a fairway, bud. Just a fairway and a little piece of life," came my reply.

"C'mon, let's go find this lodge, grab a shower and get something to eat," RB advised.

"OK, let's go. We'll be back soon enough," I said softly as I turned my back to the sea.

ROYAL COUNTY UP

I guided RB towards our next lodging destination, the Briers Country House. Taking Newcastle Road out of town we found the B&B true to its name. The place was in the middle of rolling, lush, green countryside. I didn't know just how far it would be from town but it appeared we wouldn't be walking across the street to dinner. Yet the rooms were spacious, the showers hot and the beds comfortable. Besides, we'd only be here for two nights.

Suzan, a thirty-something single mom greeted us in a cordial manner but she wasn't Rachel. We toured the house ending up in the dining room.

"What time would you be serving breakfast in the morning?" I inquired.

"Eight o'clock," she courtly replied.

"We have an 8:20 tee time at County Down," RB informed her. "Is it possible we could have an early breakfast?"

"We don't do mornings," Suzan answered as if we didn't matter.

The four of us stood there stunned at her caustic reply, not knowing what to say. She looked at us strangely and motioned us to the kitchen.

"There's cereal in the cupboard and milk in the fridge. If you want some toast the bread is over here," she said pointing to the counter. "Just be sure to put your dishes in the sink when you're finished."

We thanked her for the concession. Obviously she didn't have many golfers visit her place.

Walking back to our rooms RB started in.

"We don't do mornings? What the hell does that mean?"

"She didn't like your look, RB," Doug concluded.

"Nice attitude for an innkeeper," JJ added.

"I was looking forward to a Rachel special in the morning," RB lamented. "Cold cereal and toast? Beautiful."

"Hey, we've got hot showers," I offered.

Doug and RB shared one of the rooms at the end of the hall. JJ and I set up camp in a sizable room overlooking the courtyard.

"This isn't bad Haig," JJ commented.

"Well we weren't gonna be staying at the Slieve for two hundred pounds a night," I answered.

"No kidding," JJ agreed.

"Go ahead and jump in the shower. I'll wait," I suggested.

In thirty minutes the four of us were back in the van rolling downhill to Newcastle. The town was pretty easy to navigate. Parking the van along Main Street, the four of us hit the pavement in search of food and drink. We found the drinks first at a nearby pub. Eventually the bartender guided us to a new restaurant, Villa Vinci, a few blocks away. It wasn't hard to find a table. We wondered if that was a good or bad sign. However by the time we finished our meal the place didn't have an empty seat.

Our long day that started in Portrush, played in Ardglass then deposited us in Newcastle had taken its toll. My body ached but a few Advil would help repair the damage. The ole back loosened up a bit. RB, JJ and Doug looked the way I felt. After a victory lap around the town we decided our beds were the place to be. An early morning wake up call was only seven hours away.

As I stepped out of the shower the next morning I could hear JJ talking on the phone. This is never a good thing during a vacation. JJ's father had health complications and was in the hospital. I could tell there was some concern in JJ's voice. But he would be home in three days. There wasn't much one could do from three thousand miles away.

"Everything OK," I asked already knowing the answer.

"Well, dad is in the hospital with pneumonia. He's not good in hospitals," JJ answered.

"Who is?"

"Not much I can do."

"Well the day is here. Let's go see County Down, JJ."

We met Doug and RB in the hallway.

“Sleep well?” I asked.

“I guess,” Doug answered. “Except RB wanted to be on top all night.”

“Typical male,” I responded.

The matter-of-fact delivery cracked JJ up. He started to get Doug’s dry humor. It was obvious the three of us had grown up together.

“Let’s go raid the kitchen,” RB offered.

We headed downstairs into the unlit dining room finding the kitchen door.

“Where the hell is the light?” I asked to no one in particular.

We found the cereal, a few bowls, some milk and yogurt plus a loaf of bread.

“Where’s Rachel when you need her?” lamented RB.

“Let’s go back,” Doug suggested.

“Next time,” RB replied. “JJ wants to play County Down.”

“No grits?” JJ exclaimed. “What a disappointment.”

Rummaging through the kitchen in the dark we managed to find enough food to sustain us for the ride down the hill. A typical Irish morning greeted us as we exited the van. Overcast skies accompanied by the Irish wind introduced just a bit of chill to my extremities. But it was not Portstewart weather. Today would be very playable, especially with caddies.

The two-story clubhouse at County Down sits well within the confines of the property. It is not extravagant or gaudy. The white stucco and fieldstone façade complimented by a burnt orange tiled roof housed all the amenities you would expect from a nationally recognized club. Adorned in dark wood and green carpet, the interior hallway leading to the golf shop featured framed pictures of the holes as well as some historic artifacts from the club.

Entering the golf shop we were greeted by one of the assistant professionals. Check in took only a few minutes. RB talked to the young man about clubs in the states as Doug, JJ and me perused the apparel. At eighty pounds for a Fairway & Greene shirt the wallet would take a big hit today. No worries though, anything we brought home would provide great memories years after the trip concluded.

Scott, the assistant who checked us in, directed us to the caddiemaster in order to get our assignments. Soon a couple of loopers appeared introducing themselves to our foursome. Soon after the caddiemaster opted for a change with one of the caddies for some reason. Now we were set with a new team -- Mick and John. Both had caddied the week prior in the Walker Cup matches, Mick for Trip Kuehne and John on Billy Horschel’s bag. With veteran caddies we might have a chance to put up some decent numbers.

I busied myself by tackling the putting course, trying to get some warmth into my fingers. JJ copied my warm up, hitting some short shorts over the undulating parcel of firm turf.

“Are ya ready?” I asked JJ.

“This is gonna be a blast. Especially with the caddies,” JJ answered.

Doug and RB continued to talk with the caddiemaster as we waited our turn. I walked over to the starter house looking for any free mementos. I grabbed a pencil only to find it was not embossed with Royal County Down. Looking for tees, there were none. The caddiemaster must have noticed my dismay. He’d obviously seen it before on the faces of guests attempting to take a piece of free memorabilia back home. I made my way over to the gentleman to ask why.

The answer was simple; the members didn’t want to pay for them. Besides they figured they’d go through twice as many pencils for reasons other than keeping score. So the first instance of frugality at RCD reared its head.

Actually two memberships comprised the club – the Mourne Golf Club and the Royal County Down Golf Club. Both groups have access to the course. In 1946, the Mourne Golf Club was established under the auspices of the RCD Golf Club as a concession to the local townspeople shortly after the war. Separate facilities would be constructed for this new club. Today each group has access to both courses with the Royal County Down members having priority. One of our caddies, Mick, held a membership with the Mourne Golf Club.

Eight-twenty had arrived. Mick and John ushered us to the first tee giving us the desired line for the opener. With the wind behind us all of our tee shots found suitable places for the next shots. We walked off the tee into the fairways of perhaps the finest course we would ever play. I hoped the day would run in slow motion.

Hole one at County Down, a straightaway par five, was perhaps the easiest of the day. I managed to make birdie with some great help from John. Before hitting my third shot, a short chip from in front of the green, he lent his expertise.

“Tis goin lef ya noo,” John uttered.

“Left?” I questioned.

“Lef fer sure,” he repeated with certainty.

I looked at the shot again. To me the undulations appeared to be taking the ball towards the sea but I shoved my ego aside and went with John. The ball ended up five feet from the hole. That’s all it took. From that moment John was my seeing-eye dog. His pedigree from years of walking the property could not be disputed. He knew every inch of the place.

Both caddies practiced a unique system of conveying two bags. One bag went over the shoulder, the other on a trolley. The terrain of County Down allowed them to maneuver

their trolleys with little difficulty. Since the four of us were experienced players, John and Mick got into our match delivering information, stories, and jokes at the appropriate moments. Plus they gave our shoulders a welcome sabbatical. Coincidentally the two bore striking resemblances to Lee Westwood and Jesper Parnevik.

Today's match pitted Doug and me against JJ and RB. In reality all four of us were trying to shoot a score. But it became evident the course would overshadow any of our efforts. I could detail every hole from my perspective but it wouldn't encompass every facet of a fantastic day of golf. Briefly, holes 4,5, 8, 9, 13, 15 were the stars. That is not to say the other holes were slouches. Together the routing, topography as well as the spectacular views were a once in a lifetime experience. County Down proved to be mystical, magical, and marvelous.

I managed to get through the first four holes in even par after a nifty up-and-down on the par three fourth. One of the signature holes, the fourth looked south across the grounds towards the town, the spires of the Slieve Donard, and the Mourne Mountains. Any individual other than a golfer would take great pleasure with this stunning view. It would be one of my favorites in all of Ireland.

Whatever joy I felt walking off the fourth green quickly disappeared after an into-the-wind excursion on hole five. This brute of a dogleg demands a drive that is semi-blind to a fairway cantered left to right. From there the hole rises to a secluded green that rewards the straight shot as well as one that might fall a wee bit short. A large dune serving as a backdrop spells danger for a shot played too boldly. This hole announced that RCD wasn't going to give in to any fifty-something American trying to go low. I walked off the hole now +3 with a dreaded "other".

The sights I'll remember most were the holes playing back towards the clubhouse. The pine-covered mountains plus the background of the Slieve Donard Hotel painted an unforgettable setting. Add an occasional glimpse of the sea it became difficult to focus on the game. I recall the tee shot from the ninth tee, hitting into the mountains and watching the ball hang there briefly before falling out of sight. Firm greens with random undulations plus deep bunkers tested our short games. On hole seven, a short par three playing back into the breeze, JJ hit the green but was lucky to make bogey.

Hole thirteen was unlike any I'd seen before. Its fairway ran along a corridor veering left to right. The hills on each side of the hole were dressed in heather and gorse. I guessed a drive down the left side with a slight cut would present a great view of the large green. Unfortunately I tugged my tee shot left onto the hill. After gouging a sand wedge back to the fairway, I salvaged bogey.

Coming home the fifteenth hole offers one more opportunity for a heroic par. Requiring two well struck shots to reach the green, the hole bends left to right up a rise. From the landing area of a well-placed drive a long iron needs to be struck flawlessly to reach a generous putting surface that features drop offs instead of bunkers on each side. The flow of this challenge is easy on the eyes but tough on the execution.

The final threesome of holes, two par fours and a par five, allows players a chance to finish their rounds without too much fanfare. However I advise not going long into the back bunker on sixteen and avoiding the left side of eighteen. This last stretch doomed my chances at keeping my score under eighty. Although it appeared benign I managed to get my brain in the way of a decent number.

Doug and I managed to take the match thanks in part to his par on eighteen. The rest of us struggled on the final hole finding bunkers, bushes and uneven lies. After holing out we shook hands, looked back down the fairway one more time and said goodbye to a truly wonderful layout. Of course Doug offered another one liner to RB and JJ – “You guys never had a chance.”

We lingered around the outside of the clubhouse with John and Mick sharing some more stories. Mick recommended the evenings dining locale, Marios. Both teams from the Walker Cup had eaten there. The Italian fare was the best in town according to Mick. Having settled up with our two new friends we managed to get a picture of the six of us commemorating our special day. We once again shook hands, wished John and Mick well, then ducked inside to do some damage with our credit cards. JJ took the honors grabbing something for everyone back home.

After depleting the golf shop’s inventory we made our way upstairs to the Murlough Bar, a well-appointed room looking over the par three tenth tee. Sharing some Guinness we watched groups hit their tee shots off ten as we offered our unbiased opinions.

“That guy wins the outfit of the day,” Doug announced referencing a tall sandy-haired gent sporting more colors than the rainbow.

“I’ve seen better swings at the playground,” JJ jumped in.

“RB, who won the match today?” Doug prodded.

“Hey I was even on the back until eighteen,” RB professed.

“That’s not what I asked,” Doug replied.

True, RB had it going on the inward nine. Every since our junior days his style of play could be described as streaky. If he started rolling in birdie putts and splitting fairways you had better get out of the way. I remember a junior inter-club match with the other country club in town where he shot 65 like it was nothing. He was multi-talented and loved competition. It was good to see him engaged over the final nine at this shrine.

For the next hour inconsequential comments flew back and forth. We discussed the course in depth, a few of our shots, John and Mick, plus the good fortune of being able to play County Down right after the Walker Cup matches. According to John they only sold eight thousand tickets. He believed they could’ve sold twenty and still had folks on a waiting list.

“The locals are crazy about watching golf on this course,” he commented.

Who wouldn’t be?

I got up to stretch my legs. Against one of the walls stood a podium with a guest book. “Hey guys, we have to sign this,” I stated.

“What is it?” JJ inquired.

“Guest book,” I replied. “You ought to see the collection of names in here and where they’re from.”

I signed my name, home town and a comment. Soon after the other three added their autographs to the volume.

“That pretty much caps off the day,” announced RB.

“Yeah we’d better go before they toss us out,” I suggested.

“Harbour bar,” Doug recommended. “That’s where John said to go.”

“Sounds like a plan. You up for that JJ?” I inquired.

“Let’s go guv,” came the reply.

RB drove south of Newcastle to a rustic tavern situated on the rocky shores of the Irish Sea. The place was a stark contrast to the bar at County Down. Patrons here weren’t wearing collared shirts and khaki slacks. Dark wood and small windows made it seem like the time was later than 3:00 pm. Oddly enough European Tour golf flashed across a few television screens. Rory McIlroy’s debut as a professional captured the main storyline at the British Masters.

“Geez, everywhere we go we run into this kid some how,” observed RB.

“Well I guess we’ll see what he can do,” I answered.

“I’m gonna get a sandwich. You guys gonna grab something to eat?” RB asked.

“Yes sir,” came Doug and JJ’s replies.

An offering of basic bar food tempted our taste buds but judging from the condition of the place we went with safe selections. RB had to have his chips with ketchup. Seemed like he used the whole bottle. We sat there enjoying our drinks and sandwiches as we watched Rory battle the Belfry.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” JJ commented. “What a place, huh?”

“Yep. That’s one for the memories JJ. You’ll be hard pressed to play on those conditions again,” RB agreed.

“The turf was unbelievable. How can you get grass to grow out of something that firm?” I asked.

“Hey RB what was the hop for?” Doug inquired as to RB’s swing snafu earlier in the day.

“Back and hammy I think,” RB answered. “Something grabbed me. Invisible Cog Monster possibly.”

“Very entertaining swing,” I added. “Wonder if John and Mick had seen that move before?”

“Trust me,” Doug proclaimed. “They’ve never seen anyone like RB.”

JJ laughed out loud at the crossfire as I added a hearty guffaw. The alcohol started to loosen us up a bit. On a Thursday afternoon in September of 2007, four good friends sat around a table far removed from the day-to-day routine of life, soaking in the

camaraderie. This day would be forever etched in our minds. We would look back on it, laugh, fabricate stories and maybe get caught at odd times with inexplicable smiles on our faces. As I said earlier I wanted the day, or more accurately, the whole trip to unwind in slow motion. In two days we'd be back stateside.

“Let's hit downtown and do some souvenir shopping. I still need something for the family,” I proposed. “If I don't grab a few things the homecoming won't be as festive.” “Good idea,” agreed RB. “Besides, I'd like to see a bit more of the town. Don't need to be at Mario's until 7:30.”

The late afternoon sun peeked down on the streets of Newcastle. The persistent breeze off the water accompanied us as usual. Still our afternoon walkabout got us moving, providing much needed oxygen. The van served as our meeting point again in case we wandered off to explore on our own. Several shops dotted Main Street much like any resort town you might see back home. I ventured into an art store looking for pictures or paintings of County Down. Minutes later I checked a woolen specialty store. Cashmere sweaters along with scarves, turtlenecks and other fine attire left my mouth watering but my pocketbook aching. I thought better of passing on the fine displays rather than answering questions about a thousand dollar sweater once I returned home. A bookshop felt more comfortable allowing me to add to my gift collection. Satisfied and approaching our agreed upon time deadline, I wandered back to the van.

“Find anything guv?” JJ inquired.

“Yeah, thousand dollar cashmeres,” I replied.

“Get me one?” RB kidded.

“Didn't have your size,” I quipped. “Seriously, the place was pretty special. You'd be pressing your credit limit in there.”

“I love that stuff,” RB admitted.

“Ahh you'd look good naked,” Doug joked.

“Speak for yourself, Doug,” JJ responded. “I'm glad you guys are rooming together.”

“You don't want to even know, JJ,” I added. “Those two are not of this world.”

We kept up the one-liners all the way back to the Briers. Suzan saw that we helped ourselves to a cold breakfast. No worries she told us. We asked her how long it would take to get to Dublin. She thought about two and a half hours. Our afternoon tee time at Portmarnock afforded us extra time to experience one more leisurely morning. We might even partake of her traditional Irish breakfast. The trip was slowly unwinding in a comfortable fashion. Our final day's schedule would feature a relaxing breakfast followed by an unhurried ride down to Dublin to take on our finale venue, Portmarnock Golf Club.

After a welcome shower and some fresh clothes our driver took us to Mario's.

Occupying an older two-story residence, the restaurant was located south of town not far from the Harbour bar. Unless you knew its location you might drive right past the place, which is exactly what we did. Fortunately RB righted the ship and we found a parking spot on the South Promenade.

As we entered the first floor, the wonderful aroma of Italian cuisine filtered through the air promising a tasteful dining experience. A female server greeted us and asked if we would like a drink to which we answered yes. She provided us menus offering her expertise on the fare while instructing us to wait until we were called to come upstairs. Later we would discover she was Mario's daughter-in-law.

"This is different," observed RB.

"I wonder what's upstairs?" I questioned.

"Food," replied Doug.

"Not real busy," added RB. "We're the only ones here."

Fifteen minutes passed before we were invited upstairs. Our fearless foursome tromped up the narrow staircase to the dining room. I was caught off guard by the size; it accommodated six tables. By now the blend of garlic, rosemary, and olive oil teased my appetite. We sat at a four top comfortably situated in a window dormer. The darkened room's décor of red walls and gold drapes complemented tables set with red and white tablecloths. Now we were ready to see if Mick's recommendation fit the bill. A younger couple sat at a side table finishing up their meal.

"I like it," Doug broke the silence.

"It smells awesome," answered RB.

"Just like back home," JJ laughed. "Well almost...."

Orders were placed, wine delivered, and more stories about the day's events poured from our mouths. To say the meal was excellent might have done it a disservice. Perhaps I've had better food but the company combined with the ambience, plus the fact that Mario visited our table put this evening up there with some of my most memorable. We talked about the players from both Walker Cup teams. He told us about other American pros that had visited his restaurant. I told him I was from Green Bay and he acknowledged the Packers. He introduced us to his son and daughter-in-law. The whole experience was the highlight of our brief time in Newcastle. No, we didn't do the morning at the Briers but we sure did the evening at Mario's.

Naturally the four of us didn't want our night to end. When would we be here again?

"How about checking out the Slieve for a nightcap?" RB suggested.

"Bravo," I concurred. "Lead on."

We drove through the damp streets of Newcastle towards the well-lit Slieve Donard Hotel. For two days we caught glimpses of the stately inn; might as well see the inside. Who knows what we might find?

Entering the main foyer of the Slieve, we were greeted by marble floors leading up to saffron colored walls with white trim. Arches and crown molding topped the hallway leading to a large casual bar. We peeked in briefly but decided to explore a bit more

before grabbing a drink. Our feet took us down the hall where we could hear raucous sounds from a party. Then RB entered the Bizarro World.

A slender, bald man of about forty sporting a blue dress shirt and blue tie approached our driver.

“Hey, are you American?” he asked loudly, his accent a bit slurred.

“Oh boy,” I warned JJ. “Watch this.”

“Where are you from?” he asked, cornering RB.

“Connecticut,” RB answered, evaluating the situation.

“I LOVE Americans,” he proclaimed loudly.

“I guess that’s a good thing,” RB answered his new drunk friend.

“I like that George Bush too,” he added putting his arm around RB. “How about a picture?”

“Sure,” RB agreed. “Something to remember this grand occasion.”

We snapped a few pictures and quickly disappeared leaving RB one-on-one with Blue Man. After sitting in the bar for ten minutes RB appeared with a wry smile on his face.

“Thanks for sticking around,” came the sarcastic tone.

“Didn’t know you had a buddy over here,” Doug laughed. “I’m a bit jealous.”

“The guy wouldn’t leave me alone,” RB kept on. “He was rather inebriated plus the guy kept wanting to put his arm around me as he talked.”

“Lucky night,” Doug continued. “RB meets the man of his dreams in Ireland.”

“Northern Ireland,” I informed Doug. “Keep that straight.”

JJ sat in his chair again amused by the antics.

“What are you laughing about?” RB stared at him.

“George Bush!?! Are you kidding me?” JJ howled.

I couldn’t contain myself. The laughter might have startled a few patrons in the bar but what did we care? By this hour of the night the four of us were at altitude. Starting at 6:00 am we covered all the bases. Now all that kept us going was pure adrenaline. Eventually we regained our senses making perhaps the best decision we had made all day – it was time to go home.

“Let’s down these puppies and head for the hills,” RB advised.

“You OK?” I asked our driver.

“Yeah, I only had this one and a glass of wine at Mario’s. I’m fine, just tired,” RB confirmed.

With that we left the Slieve and RB’s Blue Buddy behind. By the time my head hit the pillow I was dreaming of our match at County Down. Tomorrow would bring the final challenge.

PORTMARNOCK MINUS ONE

The next morning I was awakened by another phone conversation between JJ and his wife Tracey. She indicated JJ's father was not doing well and that if possible JJ should hop the next flight. I jumped out of bed asking if we had a problem. He hung up the phone resigned to the fact that he needed to get home as soon as possible.

"I'd better check on flights," he said with no emotion.

"Let's see if we can find a computer," I offered.

Downstairs we gained access to the internet. All the international flights out of Dublin were in the air by 11:00 am. We had to hustle. I went to find RB and Doug. They were still snoozin' but woke up quickly when I told them the news about JJ's dad.

"We have time for a shower?" RB asked.

"Quick ones. Let's hit the road as soon as possible. I'll find Suzan so we can settle up,"

I replied.

The next forty-five minutes proved chaotic as we packed our stuff, grabbed a shower, settled our bill and secured a seat on a United Airlines flight to Atlanta. We drove out of the Briers on back roads hopefully leading us to Dublin.

During the hectic ride I tried to steer RB in the proper direction. We took a wrong turn once, circled back and jumped on the correct road as RB tested the vans versatility.

"Go RB, go!" Doug yelled mimicking an old Hertz commercial featuring OJ Simpson.

"Shut up Doug. Do what you do best – nothing," RB retorted.

Once again JJ found humor in the discourse. We pressed on trying to beat the clock and get JJ on his way home. Doug manned his cell phone trying to confirm the reservation with United. Finally we came to a familiar sight, the A1 to Dublin.

"All right," I exclaimed. "Getting closer JJ."

"Keep driving," he replied. "If we make it, we make it."

"Haigs, we might have a slight problem," RB announced. "We need gas."

"Geez, where the hell are we gonna find gas? This isn't like an American interstate," I answered.

For the next few miles we looked for an exit with a gas station. Finally we saw a sign advertising gas at the next stop. The good news was the sign was correct. The bad news, the station sat a few miles down off the main road. We jumped out of the van like a Nascar pit crew, threw a couple of liters in the tank, gunning it back to the A1. The clock read 10:40 am.

In ten minutes we hit the airport exit. Now all we had to do was negotiate the traffic circles. It looked like we were going to make it. In a scene reminiscent of an episode of the Keystone Cops, RB frantically pulled the vehicle up to the terminal entrance screeching the brakes. Doug jumped out, grabbing JJ's bag while JJ and I wrestled with

his clubs. We were cutting it close. In fact I was thinking we'd have a foursome for our afternoon time at Portmarnock. Once inside chaos prevailed. We snaked our way to the United counter checking to see if JJ would make his flight home. It looked hopeless, the mass of travelers speaking different languages, customer service reps pointing and yelling information.

"This is Mr. J," I advised a young lady behind the counter. "He needs to get to Atlanta. It's a family medical emergency. We made a reservation this morning."

JJ nodded in agreement. A million thoughts streamed through my head. What happened next left me utterly amazed. It was if an angel descended upon us.

"Mr. J, please come with me right now," the woman advised calmly.

With those simple words I watched JJ disappear into the crowd with this amazing person. She escorted JJ to his flight, checked his bags and personally walked him on the plane. It all happened so quickly. Doug and I barely had a chance to say goodbye.

"Unbelievable," I said looking at Doug blankly.

"I'm not going to say anything bad about United again," Doug replied.

"Let's go, not much more we can do now," I surmised. "He's on his way whether he realizes it or not."

RB managed to maintain his position along the curb. Doug and I jumped in the van.

"What happened?" RB asked.

"It was unbelievable," I described. "This lady from United escorted JJ down to his flight. Basically took him by the arm like a blind man."

"No kidding?"

"We were lucky. Another ten minutes and we would've been a foursome," Doug added.

"That's great. I hope his flight gets back OK. Let me catch my breath... Haigs, what do we do now?" RB inquired.

"Find a fourth?" I said trying to make light of JJ's unexpected morning event. "Let's head toward the course, grab some lunch and tee it up. Hopefully this drizzle will let up a bit."

We left the airport behind making our way north to the coast road then backtracking south heading towards our final links challenge. Portmarnock Golf Club sat on a peninsula directly east of the airport about five miles.

Our venture through the eastern part of Dublin reminded me of suburban Chicago's North Shore. Obviously the architecture had a few more years under its belt but with shops, impressive Tudor style homes, manicured lawns as well as a snooty looking tennis club displaying grass courts, we certainly weren't driving through the low rent district.

"Nice little town," RB admitted as he negotiated the lazy traffic.

"Kinda clubby looking," I added.

“I wonder if JJ got in the air?” Doug asked.

“I think that gal got him pointed in the right direction. What a saint.” I responded.

“Hope he gets to see his dad,” Doug added.

RB wheeled the van along the curvy boulevard coming upon a two-story yellow roadhouse.

“This might be the place,” I observed.

RB drove into the carpark. Only a couple of other vehicles dotted the lot in the grey mid-morning drizzle.

“Let’s see what’s inside,” RB announced.

“Fish and chips,” Doug answered confidently.

“C’mon Doug, maybe they’ve got a child’s plate,” RB chuckled.

“PB&J?”

We walked through a dark hall furnished with oak paneling and plank hardwood floors. Our attire might have alerted other patrons we were golfers in search of another links experience. However there weren’t any other patrons in the place. The main seating area opened into a sunlit octagonal level featuring oak tables and chairs arranged as four tops. Various golf mementos plus a dominant stained glass window covered one wall.

“They gotta be open, don’t they?” I blurted out to no one in particular.

With that a thirty-something waitress sporting a quizzical look approached.

“I’m sorry but our cook has not arrived at this time,” she apologized although I think she was more confused.

“Will you be serving food anytime soon?” Doug asked.

“We will,” she answered. “I’m just not sure when.”

The three of us looked at each other wondering what our next step should be. It seemed apparent we needed to find another option.

“We can eat at the club, I think,” RB suggested.

“Are you sure?” I asked knowing RB sometimes pulled the cart before the horse.

“Sure. Let’s go check it out,” RB offered.

We turned towards the door, told the waitress we were playing Portmarnock and as a result had to adhere to a schedule. She nodded kindly. For some reason walking back to the van seemed odd. A misty rain fell once again reminding us we were still in Ireland. JJ’s absence was noticeable. By now he most likely was airborne, jetting towards Atlanta. I wasn’t real sure what type of track lay ahead of us but I felt bad JJ would miss our final opportunity. But he needed to be with his family right now. At least he got to play RCD.

RB directed the van towards the Portmarnock Golf Club, the supposed Carnoustie of Ireland. The two-lane entrance road flowed through a green expanse dotted with a few trees and tall fescue. Every drive into a club emits a certain feeling of excitement or perhaps trepidation. Today’s frantic beginning got my blood flowing quickly. Now I had

come down off the anxiety high. Nourishment was required. I hoped I could lug my bag around eighteen more holes. Naturally I wanted to play well but at this point in the adventure I'd be content to just hit a few decent shots. Memories, those were the precious commodities I wanted to take back home -- memories of the ultimate foursome, golf, and a few glasses of Guinness.

"This place may be a bit snooty," RB advised. "When I talked to the secretary he more or less let me know it was a privilege to play here."

"It might be good but I doubt it's any County Down," I challenged.

"The place is flat, huh?" RB noticed as he scanned the surroundings.

"It seems appropriate," Doug mentioned. "Last trip we finished at Carnoustie and now were ending up on her sister. Beats Hickory Point."

As we approached the car park a few holes could be seen from the port side. The links appeared to stretch over a lumpy green blanket offering few clues of its challenge. Would this venue offer little more than another waltz around an Irish obstacle course? It was hard to tell. By now my mind was a bit removed from playing golf. JJ's unexpected departure left me wondering about his father, as well as the rest of his immediate family. Although I hadn't seen the good Dr. for a few years I couldn't help remember all the times he treated me like one of his own. As a college President, he broke the mold. Yet I never saw him primarily in that light. The Doc simply was JJ's old man doing a job that demanded high-powered interpersonal skills. His tenure at Furman University brought the school into a new age, breaking ties with the Southern Baptist Convention that had exerted a tremendous influence on the institution's direction. It was a tough process but Doc knew in the end if Furman was to flourish, a new course had to be taken. As these thoughts rushed through my tired mind RB finished parking the van.

"Last stop gents,"

"Not bad, not bad," Doug replied. "I think you should carry my clubs today RB."

"Trolley," I shouted out. "They gotta have trolleys."

"Let's check the protocol, get some food and see where we stand. We don't have an official tee time. We'll have to check with the secretary."

A few high profile autos along with two tour vans occupied the lot. At first it appeared as if the facility comprised a single level but behind the frontal façade various additions contributed to a larger building that had obviously grown over its history. Across the lot towards an estuary sat the golf shop, a utilitarian structure set directly behind the first tee. We attempted to move about the property in a manner conducive of guests at a private club. In other words we tried not to look too clueless.

The Portmarnock Golf Club sat on a nondescript peninsula of linksland jutting south into the Irish Sea. To be honest I hadn't researched the club prior to the trip. The luster shined on RCD and its recent hosting of the Walker Cup matches. But this place conjured a feeling of an established club flying under American radar. We walked around the side of the clubhouse and entered the facility.

“Good afternoon gentlemen,” came the greeting from a fifty-ish looking man sporting a green blazer, shirt and tie.

“Will you be playing golf today?” came the direct question.

“Yes,” RB responded. “The reservation should be under my name. We’ll only be three though. One of our playing partners had to return home suddenly.”

Doug and I avoided any inquiries, opting instead to search the expansive hallway for clues on the club’s history.

RB negotiated the game plan for the afternoon with our greeter. After ten minutes he sauntered down the hall as if he were a member. There weren’t too many surroundings that intimidated RB. As long as he understood the protocol he felt confident in his ability to fully enjoy his experience at no one else’s expense.

“Here’s the guest locker room. We aren’t allowed in the main locker room.”

“Why not?” Doug reacted kiddingly.

“Because they know who you are,” RB mused.

“Hey, at least we have a place to pee,” I offered.

“Gotta pee,” RB replied.

“I wanna see the REAL locker room. Why do you think I came all this way? It was to see the damn locker room at Portmarnock,” Doug pressed.

“Quiet Doug,” I injected.

“OK. But I just wanted...” Doug muttered.

The guest locker room offered a few lockers, worn wooden benches, a rest room facility and little else. A bit cramped, the room afforded guests the necessities to prepare for the day’s round, although I couldn’t help feel like a second-class citizen. Obviously there were reasons for keeping unaccompanied guests out of the main locker room. Perhaps some souvenir snatching Yankee ruined it for all the rest. Whatever the case, we attended to our duties and set off for the grillroom.

At the end of the long hallway stood an array of trophy cases blessed with a sufficient display of the club’s storied history.

“Look at this,” Doug exclaimed referring to an array of medals from club events.

“This is very cool,” RB observed taking in the club’s preserved relics.

Trophies, medals, clubs, pictures, books, all of the items behind the glass told a story. This was one of the primary reasons golf in this part of the world mattered. Each club maintained its unique museum of various memorabilia. They simply reminded the observer that no matter what the competition, the challenge of the game brought out the best from its participants. The history of the game poured over these venues and found its way across the globe to those who shared its passion. Fate brought us to Portmarnock to play our final round. However we also gained a greater respect for this unique game played during a much earlier time; a time that didn’t include us.

The threesome trotted up a flight of stairs to the grillroom. Pictures and paintings dressed the paneled walls leading to a non-descript rectangular room featuring a cathedral ceiling with large windows overlooking the links. I would describe it as clubby but not necessarily cozy. We attracted a few gazes from folks I deemed to be blueblood members, obviously wondering which part of America claimed us. Sitting down at a table we attempted to fit in as well as we could.

“Gonna be a little wet it appears,” I said.

“What would you recommend?” Doug prodded RB.

“Orange whip,” RB shot back. “Gotta get the orange whip.”

“What the hell?” I inquired.

“Just go with the standby pal, fish and chips,” RB advised Doug.

“Red sauce,” I advised knowing that if French fries were involved Doug and RB could easily dispose of a bottle.

“Good point,” RB replied. “No packets hopefully.”

We ordered our fare and drinks. As we chit chatted about the day and JJ’s abrupt departure, a foursome sitting a few tables away also extolled the experiences of their journey through Ireland.

“Man, I can’t wait to get home. This has been outstanding, but forty-eight days of golf is enough.”

The speaker appeared to be in his late forties, tall with sandy blonde locks and a face overexposed to the elements. RB and I locked eyes. Forty-eight days? We needed verification. Naturally RB led the inquiry.

“Excuse me, did you say you’ve been here a month and a half?” RB asked as he leaned over towards the adjacent table.

“That’s right,” the man proclaimed. “Made a complete circle of the country covering, oh, I guess fifty plus courses. Kinda lost track.”

“So this is the finale?” I joined in.

“Yep. My body can’t take much more. But this has been such a wonderful trip.”

“Quite an accomplishment,” RB congratulated the player.

The arrival of our food cut our conversation short but the three of us marveled at the man’s tale.

“I haven’t played that much in two years,” I observed while taking a sip of yet another Guinness.

“I couldn’t put up with you guys that long,” Doug said with his usual poker face.

“Obviously this guy isn’t married,” RB chuckled. “Or else he’s mega-loaded and his wife is off with her boyfriend on a forty-eight day trip to South America.”

“There you go,” I confirmed.

“Whatever, I bet he’s had one helluva ride and a gathered a few tales to take back,” Doug added.

“What do you go back to after that kind of experience?” I questioned.

“Just plain old ordinary life I guess,” RB answered.

“I doubt if this guy leads an ordinary life,” I gathered.

Looking out at the course an overcast sky spit a bit more precipitation across the grounds. A few puddles dotted the landscape. It would be soggy. Carrying my sack across the damp linksland on this final day would remind me I wasn't twenty-five any longer.

The food presentation was not unlike most private clubs. Logoed white china plates dressed with endive complimenting a healthy portion of the suggested standby. On both of my trips to Great Britain I managed to avoid beef offerings. The chicken and fish diet suited me just fine.

We munched our lunch sharing thoughts from the hectic start to the day. With JJ now winging his way back to the states, the conversation lacked that vital fourth element we enjoyed during the first days of the trip. His wit and humor fit in well with the group. His finest moment definitely came at Portrush. The day unraveled in a manner befitting John's easy-going personality. His consistent ball striking in a variety of late afternoon weather conditions verified what RB asked before the trip – could he play? Certainly JJ could play on and off the course.

“It's too bad about JJ's dad,” RB broke the silence.

Doug put down his drink taking a serious tone. “He's a great guy, Mark. I really enjoyed meeting him and getting the chance to play a few rounds.”

“He's one of the all-time best guys you'd ever meet. I know he really hated to leave,” I replied. “He liked watching you swing it.”

“Definitely Cog material,” RB added. “It would be great to get him up there.”

“Maybe someday,” I figured. “Maybe someday.”

Finishing up our noon meal the three of us focused on our assault of Portmarnock. It would be wet, it would be late and it would be our last tango in Ireland. Our trip would be remembered for a variety of things, Rachel's great hospitality, the “booth hopper”, the wonderful day at Portrush, the sleet at Portstewart, so many occurrences ran through my head. Yes I was drained. These golf trips involving play on consecutive days demanded one be in some kind of shape. I was going to make it but once I returned home the clubs might be taking a brief furlough.

“Ready?” RB asked.

“I'm set,” Doug replied. “Let's see what this place has in store. So far it's barely passing the test... guest lockers, can you believe it?”

His attempt at re-circling the locker issue brought a quick snicker. As long as you were attuned to Doug's humor, the material was pretty strong. Sometimes you just had to go with it to see where it ended.

“I’m sure you could apply for some kind of non-resident membership, Doug,” I commented.

“Any club that would consider having me as a member I wouldn’t want to join,” Doug admitted.

We checked in again at the secretary’s desk for final instructions. He remembered RB.

“Mr. B, your group will be at 2:20 and we will be on time,” came the announcement.

“Thank you, sir,” RB confirmed. “We’re looking forward to it.”

“She’ll be a bit damp but playable. Enjoy the afternoon,” replied the starter.

Well, that was partly true. I don’t know why clubs are not more forthcoming about their playing conditions. We quickly realized on our first hole the putting challenge on Portmarnock’s greens would be suspect. Apparently they had been recently verticut leaving small parallel pathways running across the surfaces. Certainly nothing could be done about this required maintenance but had we known of the superintendant’s intentions and timeline perhaps we would be playing a different venue. The beginning of the day already had shocked the system. Now I’d be wrapping up my final exam in Ireland on washboards.

The three of us wasted away the minutes before our time. With the practice area conveniently hidden from the first tee a small bucket was out of the question. Frankly, I didn’t even know where the putting green was. We jumped into the golf shop for a look around. The inventory of apparel was impressive as was the pro that was trying to bait us into two-for-one deals. I ended up buying a single headcover for my son Ben. I’d try to convey the story of our journey someday. Hopefully at that time he’d still have the headcover.

The clock on the clubhouse indicated we were the next group off. I stood on the back of the first tee swinging a couple of clubs trying to get loose. RB wandered off, while Doug checked his bag for necessary items.

Finally the group ahead cleared the fairway as Portmarnock waved us on. I managed to slash my drive far left of the fairway but still had a shot to the green. As we walked off the tee in a missing man formation nothing was said amongst the three of us. I’m sure the fact JJ was not a part of our pairing had something to do with the odd silence. Our trip had been thoroughly enjoyable up to this morning. Now a grueling march under a dim, overcast sky challenged our stamina.

Upon arriving at the green my focus became a bit keener.

“Geez, look at this thing,” I observed.

Heaving in a bizarre pattern of swales and dips the verticut putting surface surprised us.

“Looks like there’s going to be a premium on the flat stick,” RB answered.

“And luck,” I replied. “I’m glad the starter informed us of the verticut conditions.”

Doug said nothing, which was appropriate since he was the best putter of the group. We completed our trial of the first green without any major disasters heading for the second tee.

The next trio of par four holes played out to the estuary on an unprotected sandy parcel of fescue. With puddles prevalent, the fairways squished under our feet making three hundred plus yard holes play longer. Portmarnock gained our attention at the 425 yard fourth, a right to left dogleg playing back into the breeze. With the right side of the fairway protected by four pairs of bunkers, each pair placed every hundred yards or so, the tee shot begged for a route up the left center of the fairway. A large circular putting surface accommodated a variety of long shots and fortunately did not feature the undulations we encountered on our opening hole.

“Great hole,” Doug finally muttered.

“Interesting bunkers,” I offered.

“Too bad it’s wet. This place would be fun if it played like County Down,” RB observed.

“Not gonna see many better than RCD,” I added.

“Didn’t you say that was the one place JJ wanted to play, Haigs?” Doug asked.

“Yep,” I answered. “He was obsessed with the place.”

“Glad he got to play it. He seemed to enjoy everything. Good move inviting him,” RB joined in.

“He doesn’t snore as much as Tater.” I replied.

“Well I hope he gets back in time to see his dad,” Doug said once again.

We continued our sloshing through the links. The sixth hole, a solid par five took us out towards the sea. Thick, moist air blanketed the grounds. Soggy turf was starting to take its toll. My legs began to feel heavy. Maybe it was our all out dash to get JJ airborne. Perhaps this final day caught me a bit out of shape. Usually I don’t play seven days straight. Carrying the clubs wasn’t helping either. It made me appreciate our loopers from the day before at RCD. Obviously it had to do with the perfect storm of all those factors coming together. I wasn’t a kid any more although I hated to admit it. Was this what fifty felt like?

By the time we reached the ninth green the conversation became sporadic. Playing a threesome differed significantly from a foursome. Our fourball matches had lost an integral component. Each of us tried to play as well as we could. A few notable shots were struck but the majority, forgettable. I extricated myself from a pot bunker at the scenic par three fifteenth narrowly missing a par. The short hole paralleled the beach giving the three of us one final chance to see and feel the true nature of Irish links golf. The following hole, another strong par five found RB in a unique predicament – he buried his tee ball in the revetted layers of a fairway bunker. Finally we had something to laugh about.

“Can you believe this?” RB growled.

“Never seen that before,” I added, trying to offer sympathy.

“I’d rather be in it, I mean the sand,” RB replied.

“Well if you had gotten your drive higher than ten feet off the ground you might have carried it,” Doug observed.

“He hit a wind ball, Doug,” I said, knowing that RB hit his ball in the forehead.

RB took an unplayable lie, dropped his ball and advanced it up the fairway. As the sun faded in the sky the temps cooled and a stern cross breeze added a few yards to the final long hole of the trip.

All I wanted was to make a par on one of the final three holes. It wasn’t to be. I three putted the sixteenth, bogied seventeen and had to put it in my pocket on eighteen. RB and Doug struggled home as well although Doug parred the home hole with two fine shots reaching the elevated green. As dusk settled over Portmarnock, areas of ground fog rose from the linksland creating a mystical setting.

Walking off the eighteenth green I looked at RB and Doug, two of the best men I have walked countless holes with, extended my hand and offered my sincere thanks. Standing on the last Irish putting surface I might ever see, the surroundings became veiled by the murkiness. I was exhausted. The wet turf combined with lugging my bag made me feel like an over-the-hill prizefighter. But I managed a wry smile as flashbacks from the week’s events ran through my mind. We put together an amazing adventure through both Irelands, shared great stories, laughed until we cried and once in a while hit shots in the manner they were intended.

“Guys, we made it,” I said. “Thanks so much.”

“A trip I won’t soon forget,” Doug added. “RB, take us home.”

“Haigs, where are we going?” RB asked.

“Let’s go grab our stuff and I’ll figure it out.” I replied.

“Great trip, my friends,” RB echoed

We made our way to the van, threw our clubs in the back, and walked to the “guest” locker room to retrieve our shoes. Darkness had set in.

“I’m starvin’,” RB announced as he sat on a bench changing his shoes.

“There’s a restaurant in the hotel. Don’t know what the menu is like but it should be safe,” I replied.

“Fish and chips? They have to have fish and chips for my final meal,” Doug added.

In five minutes we rolled out of the parking lot of Portmarnock in search of the Bewleys Airport Hotel. I booked two rooms. Since JJ and I were flying out together to Philadelphia we’d be in one room. But JJ was already stateside attending to his father. Doug and RB would return the rental van early then hop their flights home. I’d grab the airport shuttle a bit later.

Bewleys Hotel sat within a couple of miles of the Dublin airport. A structure of glass, brick and concrete it had all the ambiance of a hospital. Fortunately it did have a restaurant, an open arrangement of tables spread across the expansive first floor. Everything ran together – the front desk, lounge, dining area all competing for their own identity. We managed to find our rooms, drop our gear and reconvene back at the restaurant.

“This isn’t bad, Haigs,” RB observed.

“It’s not Rachel’s,” I added.

“And it’s not that place in County Down. What the hell was the name of that joint?” RB quizzed.

“At least they do dinner here,” Doug joined in.

“What did you think of Portmarnock?” RB threw the first subject on the table.

“It’s hard to say cuz it was so wet. I’d like to play it dry,” Doug replied.

“It’s no Carnoustie,” I analyzed.

“I’d have to agree,” RB stated.

“Playing County Down yesterday with that firm turf it’s really not a fair comparison,” I surmised.

“There weren’t any bad holes do you think RB?” Doug asked.

“I didn’t think so. Maybe it was the conditions. Pretty wet out there,” RB offered.

“Wasn’t expecting those verticut greens,” I added. “Did we play any course where it didn’t rain?”

“Maybe Ardglass, the others had wet occasions,” Doug answered.

Our food arrived, Doug and RB getting the mandatory order of chips.

“Hey buddy,” RB addressed the waiter, “Can you bring us some ketchup?”

“Y’mean red sauce?” came the reply.

“Sure, just bring some out on your way back,” RB directed.

The waiter returned with four packs of red sauce, the type you’d find at a fast food restaurant. RB looked disappointed.

Addressing our waiter again RB politely asked, “Do you think we might be able to get a few more of these?”

The waiter looked at RB blankly as if he’d just stolen the crown jewels of Bewley’s red sauce stock. In a few minutes he returned with a few more packets. Once again a look of disdain flashed across RB’s face.

“Do you folks have bottles of this stuff,” came his next inquiry to our waiter.

“Oh, we’re no’ allowed ta bring those oot tha kitch’n,” he replied.

“Then what good are they?” RB asked, looking for an honest answer.

“I guess ther jus ta cook wit,” answered our waiter.

The three of us looked at each other confused.

“I’ll tell you what,” RB initiated his bribe. “If you can smuggle a bottle out of the kitchen it might be worth your while.”

“Ooh I cudn’t do tha’ but I’ll bring ya sum more packs,” he answered.

With that response RB threw his hands up in the air. When RB and Doug finished their chips a pile of red sauce packets covered our table. Our waiter surely thought RB’s red sauce craving might jeopardize the entire restaurant operation. Somehow it seemed fitting for a day that had started sixteen hours earlier.

“Think JJ made it back OK,” Doug pondered.

“Well he should be back by now,” I figured.

“Was someone going down to pick him up?” Doug asked.

“Not sure,” I replied. “I think he was planning on renting a car and driving home.”

By now the wick of the day’s candle flickered for a few final moments. Doug and RB’s early wake up call summoned them to a hot shower and a few hours of sleep before heading home. I’d spend my final evening in Ireland alone with too many thoughts running through my mind.

Before heading to our rooms RB asked for trip highlights.

“County Down,” I answered. “Although I could add a bunch more.”

“Rachel’s and Portrush was a great start,” Doug added. “Best restaurant had to be Mr. Fish & Chips.”

“I’d have to say the driving,” RB responded. “I was a scratch at it.”

“My friend,” I said. “You did one helluva job getting us around this country. I don’t know if I could’ve done it. I’m actually glad I didn’t have to.”

“Well it surely didn’t compare to your driving of the golf ball,” Doug jabbed for a final time.

“At least he hit it on the planet, Doug. I drove it like Stevie Wonder,” I concluded.

We rambled on a bit longer in the hallway before wishing each other a safe journey home. Who knew when we’d see each other again? Chances of a Christmas rendezvous in Decatur seemed possible but with family commitments you were never sure if schedules would coincide. As RB and Doug strolled down to their room at the end of the hallway I thanked them again for a great trip. Doug threw a few verbal jabs at RB, all of us laughed one more time, and finally we closed our doors on a week we’d always remember.

Although I was dead tired from the week, I couldn’t fall sleep. Maybe I stared at the ceiling all night due to the events of the seven previous days. I couldn’t believe it was over. Yet I realized how fortunate I had been to spend a golf holiday with three great friends. By the time I awoke the next morning RB and Doug were airborne. I showered, checked my luggage one more time then made my way downstairs to check out. A few

folks milled about the lobby as a few streaks of sunshine streamed through the glass atrium. Locating the airport shuttle, I tossed my stuff onboard and fell into a seat. I checked my watch. Everything seemed to be in order.

Upon arrival to the Dublin airport I didn't foresee the state of confusion I'd be entering. As I look back on the experience I wonder how an airport can operate without computers. The main terminal consisted of numerous makeshift lines with airline personnel directing traffic. My itinerary took me first to Philadelphia then onto Chicago. An employee from US Air asked me my final destination. I told her Chicago. But I also told her I was going to Philly first. Maybe I said this five times but it didn't matter. I took a spot in a line for an American Airlines flight direct to Chicago. After talking to another passenger I realized I stood in the wrong line. Locating an agent from US Air I told him about my predicament. He escorted me to the front of the Philly departure line.

After clearing check in I entered the Mall of Ireland. Half of the airport was dedicated to retail shoppes providing passengers one last chance to unload their pockets. I still had a few Euros so I grabbed some odds and ends including a pack of shortbread cookies for a snack.

My flight to Philly had only a few empty seats. Maybe one was JJ's; he was booked on the same plane. Due to the traffic we loaded on the tarmac. I climbed the stairway to the US Air plane, a Boeing 767, paused to take one last look at the blue Irish sky and walked through the doorway leading back to real life. Surprisingly it wasn't raining. Getting acclimated in my seat I had only two final thoughts – Man, that was one helluva trip and when are we going to do it again?

POSTLUDE

There are experiences in everyone's life that leave indelible marks. This excursion to Ireland was one of mine. During my lifetime I've traveled to Europe twice for only one purpose – to play a game under conditions we cannot replicate in the states.

My companions on both trips are truly some of the finest individuals one could ever know. Regretfully my dear friend JJ passed away in November of 2009 and will never have the opportunity to travel with us again. Briefly I'd like to tell you about this wonderful gentleman I met through the game. This manuscript is dedicated to his memory.

In the fall of 1977 I transferred to Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina from the University of Miami. I had hoped to play college golf at UM but things didn't quite work out in Coral Gables. Plus I wasn't thrilled with the school's urban location. Once I visited Furman I was sold. The campus featured its own golf course but more importantly the tranquil, park-like campus blew me away. From the brick colonial style buildings, to the bell tower, a spring fed lake surrounded by plenty of green space I saw

myself fitting in at Furman. Plus the enrollment of twenty-two hundred students allowed for more manageable class sizes as well as better interaction with professors.

One October Saturday I decided to play a few holes at the “Ole FU” as we called it. The course was empty so I hopped on the first tee going out alone. By the third hole I started playing various shots until I noticed a single coming up behind me. It was JJ. He seemed like a decent guy so I asked if he wanted to play along. We joined forces on the fourth tee and for the next thirty-three years became brothers. JJ got me my first Masters ticket. We were in each other’s weddings. The number of basketball games we attended escapes my mind. I visited Greenville more often than he came to Illinois or Wisconsin but that had something to do with the weather as well as the Masters. I watched him raise his family, manage a successful financial practice, sent him golf clubs, talked with him at least three times a week, and just hung out enjoying life together. Sadly, I watched him battle a bizarre illness that would ultimately take his life. On November 20, 2009 I delivered his eulogy.

To this day my life is not as full as it could be. The thing I miss most is picking up the phone to chat with him about any subject under the sun. He should be there. He was there for thirty-three years.

Ah, but there are the vivid memories, comical stories, and strange anecdotes I’m still able to hold onto because of our relationship. At times I relate them to members of his family. We laugh while remembering the good times attempting to fill the void. I know it’s hard for many of us who knew the man so well. There will never be another JJ nor should there be. He was simply the best in so many ways.

Finally I’d like to relate one last story about my friend. Perhaps his greatest quality was his sense of humor. Whether he was laughing at something or himself this quality helped him make the best of his life and adding to so many others. In our early years it wasn’t unusual for us to go out on a Friday night, have a few beers and catch *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*. We watched it so often we’d recite the dialogue during rounds of golf.

JJ’s last days were spent at the Duke Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina. I visited him in mid October but he fell into a comma-like state, never responding verbally. Yet I know he could hear me. I stayed in Durham for three days praying for a miracle, talking to doctors while trying to support his incredible wife Tracey. After returning home to Green Bay, I called Tracey a few days later at Duke. In the background I could hear the television with sporadic laughter. It was JJ. He and one of his doctors were watching *The Holy Grail* one more time. I started to cry; not out of pity but rather from joy. Here was my friend in his final days laughing out loud. It is something I’ll never forget. In a way he was teaching me one final lesson. As his life came to a close he relied on the one thing that always served him well – his sense of humor. You could not suppress it in him.

Thank you my friend for thirty-three incredible years. They passed all too quickly. Thanks for sharing yourself with three “Decaturites” over the course(s) of six wonderful days in Ireland. Gone but not forgotten. No sir, none of us will ever forget John J.

Kick in a few putts for us JJ while you’re waiting for us. We will see you again on the first tee and you will have the honors. There is yet another match to be played.

SCORECARD

Here are a few highlights from Ireland.

Best Driver: RB behind the wheel

Best Breakfast: Rachel’s hands down

Best Views: All of ‘em

Best Meal: Mario’s

Worst Meal: Mr. Fish & Chips

Most Comfortable Beds: Briers Country House

Best Guinness Environment: Royal Portrush Grill Room

Best Opening Tee Shot: Portstewart Strand

Best Roadway: A2

Best Irish Whiskey: Bushmills

Best Playing Conditions: Ardglass

Worst Playing Conditions: Portstewart Strand

Best Scenic Drive: Road to Ballyliffin

Cutest Bev Cart Girls: N/A

Best Turf: RCD

Best Clubhouse Facade: Ardglass

Best Shower: Bewleys

Best Golf Shop: RCD

Friendliest Shop Attendant: Portstewart

Nicest Locker Room: RCD

Most Interesting Character: Couch Dancer

Best Comment: "We don't do mornings."

