A Friendly Round of Golf

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IT was a sunny Tuesday in late September, and more than a little breezy in northeast Ohio. A chill hung in the shade, notifying wage earners to look to their weather stripping, and prompting men of substance to put on pretty sweaters for their rounds of golf.

Five men sat at a table for six in the club’s formal dining room. Cyril Keaton—husky, graying, lion maned, important, self-important—glanced at the empty chair, laid the club’s luncheon menu flat, and folded his hands over it. “What in hell’s keeping Crump, I wonder? Know you that, young Reed,” and here he sighed mightily as if displeased, which he was not, “demon golfer and all-around thorn in our sides today?” The other three men chuckled duly, and Reed smiled in his easy way.

Crump was their host. Despite his place beneath Keaton on the organization chart, he was a member of the Moses Cleaveland Links, by some fluke that Keaton had never in eighteen years of knowing Crump managed to trace back to its source or replicate for himself. Thus when he wished to treat a prized contact to a day on that most exclusive of golf courses, he had to throw himself on Crump’s mercy. Or so Keaton saw it.

Crump had excused himself from the table as soon as he delivered them there and was at that moment in a low-ceilinged room three stories below, his elbows comfortably braced on a workbench as a visiting factory rep, having tucked his knit tie safely between two shirt buttons, applied tackier grips to the steel shafts of Crump’s six and seven irons. Crump liked to play without a glove. He was not concerned about the time and preferred to skip heavy lunches anyway, as a defense against heart attack and stroke. (In a year or so he would have proof it hadn’t worked). Besides, Keaton—who sat atop many companies, including the one that Crump ran—had ordained that lunch would not be in the moderately efficient men’s grill or the almost speedy snack bar but in the stately dining room. Keaton liked to set the pace when he was working on people. This Crump was willing to suffer out of obligation and respect, but not in person.

As tradition dictates, the clubhouse was sited between the front nine, which the group had just completed, and the back nine, the work of the afternoon. The building had been laid up in stages over time by a succession of forgotten architects, always keeping its back to the low hill that blocked the view of the old city’s idle smokestacks and ragged suburbs. The dining room’s broad windows thus gave only onto the course, ancient, famous, monstrous, as strange to its surroundings as some barren chunk of old Hibernia, swept up in the continental drift and planted there. The fairways and greens seemed to have sprouted of their own volition in the manner of gem fields and fairy rings. In fact, the landscape was made ten thousand years before by a retreating ice sheet a mile deep and was all but ready for play the next morning. Migrating ice beats the bulldozer every time, as an instrument of golf course design.

Out on the lake, beyond the rills and dunelets of the links, gusts from Manitoba were throwing up whitecaps and merrily knocking their tops off. Every ball hit up in the air that morning, unless it was hit dead straight, zoomed out of its original trajectory into a hook or slice. Joe Reed, whose work time was spent in the lower echelons of Crump’s finance department, was the only man in the group who could hit a ball dead straight. This rare gift made him Crump’s go-to man for business golf and put Reed in areas of the company’s business otherwise closed to him. There was grumbling in the ranks about that, Reed knew. Reed’s schools and prior jobs didn’t stand up to the Ivy Leaguers, with the magnificent internships and first jobs at Fortune Top Fifty companies. The stasis of his career was beginning to cause Reed to wonder if golf was a sustainable career advantage or more of a novelty that would evaporate as soon as the company recruited a bear with a unicycle.

Keaton’s subguests, and the objects of his affection for one day at least, were Fosse and Borowiak, the two owners of a shipping business that plied the Great Lakes and out to the Maritimes, who, according to rumor, wanted to sell out but had not said so. Keaton observed them sipping their Long Island iced teas as if drinks at lunch were part of a new station in life. Both had second wives and large homes in Hawaii, described by Keaton’s source on Lanai (an ex-employee, discharged but not disgraced, at least not entirely, but with a known propensity for exaggeration) as looking less like second homes and more like “an upgrade for the Duke of Earl.”

Keaton wanted to buy—he was a collector of businesses—but only if they were already committed to selling. Keaton would never chase a deal. Despite the casual tenor of his invitation—“You fellows have played Scotland and Ireland, might as well see something good”—Fosse and Borowiak hoped a price, or at least a vague range of possible prices, would be hinted at and had brought their banker with them to help listen. They were going to have to listen very hard, because it was a Keaton lodestar never to be the first party to talk about the money. Once the profane subject of money was broached, there could be no more genteel conversation about doing right things in right ways and honor among businessmen.

“I thought he went to change his shirt. I wonder if somebody should go check on him,” said the banker, a man of conspicuous concern for others.

Keaton suppressed a smile. If they were fixated on Crump they wouldn’t be thinking about him. They would not be watching the magician’s hands. “Oh, well now,” he said, “nobody wants to run the risk of catching Crump with his shirt off. Could cost a man his life, or at least his eyesight.”

The banker, a man less inclined to banter than to housekeeping, pressed his lips together as he laid the scorecards out on the table and recited everyone’s condition in the skein of bets: the three-way Nassau, Irish four-ball, six-man cha-cha, and the no-less-important side bets on things such as greens reached in regulation and bunkers escaped in one. Fosse and Borowiak were up at the turn and silently counting the coup of besting the president of a New York Stock Exchange–listed holding company.

“Maybe Crump’s seeing about our time slot for the back nine,” Reed said amiably, and stood. “I’ll have a look in the pro shop.” Reed was overjoyed at the excuse to get away from a scene in which he was a decoration. A halfhearted search for Crump was just the thing. Even though Reed had mastered the nonchalance of speech and gesture that marks the private club milieu, he preferred to play his golf with the assistant pro at the municipal course in Painesville, a limber brunette with a high backswing and a hearty contempt for business administration as a life’s endeavor. She was a working girl, a steamfitter’s daughter, and not yet open to the charms of luxury. Reed had gentled her into a flimsy agreement to disagree over his career goals.

She had never seen such a golf course as this, Reed thought, and if she ever did, she would see that on whatever day that fate decreed you should play the best round of your life, it would be worth having sacrificed to spend it here.

With Reed out of the way, Keaton leaned forward with a “now it’s just us old boys” smile. He told a good joke about a novice monk who lacked faith but stayed on for the food, and a lesser one about a retirement-home romance, whose punch line was “Parkinson’s.” This brief interlude removed them sufficiently from the two absentees that they were able to proceed with lunch: two lobster salads (the would-be sellers), a captain’s platter of assorted fried fish (the banker), and a veal shank on a bed of rosemary mashed potatoes for Keaton.

“Don’t know how I’ll swing a club past my belly after this,” Keaton said, when his plate was set in front of him. It was the kind of remark he often made to Crump, to lighten the tone of their head-banging sessions together, and he made it now for the pleasure of habit. He was a man who performed many small acts that served only to comfort him.

Keaton had a genially overbearing charisma that was part and parcel of his NCAA defensive tackle’s physique. He managed to convey the impression that to be on good terms with him was a thing of great value. Selling a company to him, it could easily be believed, implied deals yet to come, even a bond for life. “Told the stewards not to load a breakfast for the flight down from Chicago this morning, regretted it the minute I said it. Can’t be going back on things in front of the stewards, though.” From the ensuing laughter, Keaton caught, and noted well, the music of exhilaration.

“What about that boy Reed?” said Fosse with a compensating severity. “Pured a two iron off the tee on the dogleg five, a frozen rope, and on the green in two? Then he four-putts for bogey. That’s called inconsistent; do the math.”

In fact, it was Reed’s massive drive that had been the lapse; it drew a Crumpian frown and necessitated the four-putt to set things right. Crump had asked him to play it “kind of subtle in the front nine,” and on the Tuesday before had sent him over by himself for a practice round. But when Reed saw the sixth fairway, its graceful curve mimicking the natural shape of his drive, he swung away. With that exception, his attack on the course was a matter of placement, hitting no longer than the others but with the control that lofted clubs give, making sure that his ball came to rest with a goodly avenue to the next target.

“Trouble is,” Keaton said, “you let Crump put himself down as a sixteen handicap. A sixteen. Hell, even I tried to stop you.” There was laughter at that too, and Keaton went on. “Crump at golf is a box of chocolates compared to when I have to corner the old villain on next year’s profit plan. He’s got more secrets than a camel broker, and no matter how hard I squeeze, I always know he’s got a holdback.” In other words, he, Keaton, was the honest one—a falsehood, covered by a fresh-picked fig leaf of humor. It’s remarkable that such strategies work, since everyone knows them by heart, but, like good cop, bad cop, they snag us in the pulpy stuff that lies beneath the level of reasoning thought. Crump saw betting on golf as a form of expectation, and expectations as the enemies of a concentrated mind. Crump almost always played alone, a few holes at a time or a side at most, with the oldest caddy at the club, James Edward, carrying his bag. They could be seen from a distance, walking the fairways, talking away at each other nonstop, about what, nobody could say.

Reed reached the pro shop, where Crump had not been seen. He checked the order of play; the pro had seen them sitting down to lunch and pushed their time back. Reed stood easy while the pro showed him a rescue club that was new on the market. To escape gracefully he had to agree to try it out, knowing a hooded seven iron would, in his hands, do the same work.

From there he peeked into the dining room, to make sure Crump hadn’t gotten around behind him, then downstairs, where he passed the shoe boy bringing Borowiak’s FootJoys upstairs with a fresh shine on them. By hitting to the wrong side of a greenskeeper’s shed, Borowiak had left two balls in Jamie’s Bog—the one he hit into it, and the first one he dropped and tried to hit out—and didn’t want the mud on his saddle oxfords to remind him. The shoe boy had not seen Crump, either.

Reed didn’t particularly want to find Crump, but he had to seem to look. He descended another level to the men’s locker room, with its vastness of mahogany cabinetry: still no Crump, nor anyone else. He would have to go back soon. To cheer himself, he considered driving to Painesville as soon as he was free of them. But it was a bad idea to surprise a stolid girl at her work. He despaired, and closed himself into one of the capacious toilet stalls. He locked the door and sat on the lid while three levels above him Keaton initiated, over key lime pie, what appeared to be a disinterested conversation about vacation homes but would soon ventilate the blabbermouth shipping magnates’ pineapple dreams. There would be the usual lawyers and drafts and fits and starts, but from that moment, no mystery about the outcome.

After a few minutes Reed’s spirits had recovered enough for him to venture out. The door to another stall opened simultaneously, and like a king troll from his loamy grotto, Crump emerged. Reed, stricken, realized but dimly that neither of them had flushed. Crump faltered too, but it is easier for a curmudgeon to conceal surprise than it is for normal members of society. He went, in his toppling, sore-footed gait, to the sinks to wash his hands; Reed followed suit. Their eyes met in the glass.

“Hiding out, are we,” Crump growled to Reed’s reflection.

Reed didn’t know if it was a statement, a question, or an accusation. “Me?” he managed to ask.

“Both of us, numnuts,” Crump laughed, half bark and half snort. “Judas Priest, I hate this social butterfly crap. My own golf course too. Like bringing a couple of fat old whores to church.” With thumb and forefinger he picked a white linen hand towel off the stack without disturbing the rest. Reed did the same. Crump worked his towel into each finger web. “You uncomfortable with these golf gigs? You sure act like it sometimes.”

“Well, no, I guess. Except stuff gets back to me. I don’t want to—I mean—”

“Worrying people think it’s not kosher,” Crump said, to cut off further bush beating. “We got no rabbi to rule on that. Tell you this, though. Nobody gets into this show without some kind of ticket, and a lot of them won’t look legit to you if you don’t have ’em. Man goes to a famous school because his daddy went there, or he’s got a clever wife everybody likes to talk to, or there’s family connections going way back so he looks substantial somehow. Once you’re in, you still got to do the work, and the work ain’t easy. Your opinion, does Keaton want this deal?”

Things were moving too fast for Reed to think, which was what Crump intended, and Reed said what came into his mind. “He wants them to want it first, that’s why we’re going through this dance.”

“Good for you,” Crump said, and Reed’s capillaries buzzed. “Keaton wants a navy but nobody else knows it. Those amateurs are still pitching. Brought their goddamn banker, could they make it more obvious? You saw the balance sheet I sent you? Never minding Keaton for a minute, is this a good deal for little old Cleveland Works?”

“They’ve gotten rid of their local auditors and brought in a big national firm. Their balance sheet looks sanitized.” Reed felt his eyes widen as he spoke.

“So they’re crooks?”

“Not necessarily. Maybe just aggressive enough that we’d have a hard time making the rate of return we like.”

“When you talk to me, don’t be so polite,” said Crump, with a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

Reed fought down the terror and described a way to structure the deal so as to leave behind, in the sellers’ hands, any unlisted liabilities. Crump nodded, then turned and washed his hands again as he hummed “Bringing in the Sheaves.” Reed washed his hands again too and imagined what the girl of the high backswing would say if she saw him caballing down here like this. He felt unfaithful, and then foolish for feeling it.

“Trouble with Keaton is,” Crump said in a philosophical tone of voice, “he’ll do business with any sort, and congratulate himself for holding the moral high ground, until he gets sick of ’em. Next thing you know, he’s left us with some dirty bird whose wings he could have clipped but didn’t. Tell you what.” Crump squared around to Reed with the tension back in his voice. “Let Keaton be Keaton, but they need to understand that when he’s not around, which is near about always, they’re dealing with us.” He propped his emaciated, yet lumpy, backside against the countertop, and waited to read the results—understanding? complicity?—of his litmus test on Reed’s face.

“You mean you want—” Reed began, and hesitated, unwilling to claim that he had understood.

“Yeah. No mercy. You’ve seen the last three holes; can you play ’em in one under par today?”

“I believe I can, Mr. Crump.”

Crump reached out and grasped Reed’s wrist at the watchband. Reed managed not to leap back; Crump only turned his wrist to see the time. “Good, we’ll ham-and-egg it. That’ll flip every dang bet our way. Hey? Don’t feel bad. You owe it to people to show ’em who you are. If they’re stand-up fellows they’ll take their licking the right way—fast pay makes fast friends—and we’ll treat ’em accordingly. That’s a deal they’ll never get from their new friend the admiralissimo.”

Reed, though, was not anywhere near feeling bad. He was feeling that he might perhaps birdie all three holes. It was a matter of concentration. He would have a fine story to tell but realized as he followed Crump out of the bathroom that half of it could be told only at the office—who else would understand?—and the other half could be told only to the girl. Half his life here, half there, no one fully briefed. A whiff of espionage rose from it, and Reed found he liked that.

Crump led the way out, taking a serpentine route through an empty private dining room, a double-jointed service corridor, and a dry goods pantry—Reed noticed, of all things, the stacked tins of smoked oysters—to reach a ramp that led them up and out, blinking in the glare, behind the caddies’ station.

“James Edward!” Crump called to a broad-shouldered Jamaican who was wiping down Keaton’s clubs. “We’re going to beat these fellows fair and square. Make sure you give them a member’s read on their putts, we don’t want that on our conscience too.”

James Edward winked at Reed and smiled at Crump, who smiled back. “We’d be naive,” Crump went on, “not to assume that people are generally vile.” He took a golf ball from his pocket and thumbed it around in his palm, looking for cuts, then handed it to James Edward. “But listen. If we don’t give their better sides a fair chance to show, we’re just assholes.”

“Amen to that,” said James Edward, and Reed hoped Crump’s speech was meant for him and not the caddy. The three of them walked up to the tenth. They found Keaton standing astride the tee marker as if just voted into membership, holding a stern face until he saw them, then beaming. Fosse and Borowiak were a little behind, marveling to each other on the impossible narrowness of the fairway.

To Reed the fairway was as broad as all Ohio. His line would be down the right side above the tips of the larches, with topspin and the crosswind to help it back to center. As he waited his turn with the cool steel shaft of the one wood cradled in the crooks of his folded arms, he watched Borowiak overswing, sending his ball loafing lazily toward the nearest fairway bunker, and daydreamed: the girl in fluid midswing, her white ball firing out in a flat arc and her dark ponytail, passed through the open back of her cap, tossing in the bright air. He possessed all the requisite facts, and just the germ of the realization that it would never be.

Reed set his ball on the little white tee and took his stance. He brought the club head around him until he could see it out of the corner of his left eye, then accelerated it back the way it came, and the ball whispered away as he had willed it