

OPEN LINKS

**DOMINIC
HOLLAND**

Prologue

He gave up pretending to sleep and opened his eyes for good. He sighed, heavily.

Everything felt wrong; or nothing felt right. He couldn't decide. It felt like he hadn't slept at all. Not a single wink - and this added to the acute sense of anxiety that had started yesterday afternoon. And not any ordinary anxiety or nerves; that much he was used to. This was something else. Something untoward and unsettling.

The fear of the unknown; don't they say that's the worst fear of all? And so why should he feel normal, on a day like today?

It was just after 4.30am, half an hour before his alarm was scheduled to go off. His tiredness aside, nothing felt normal or safe. Unique circumstances, he reminded himself again; quite possibly the most important day of his life. And in all likelihood, today was one-of-a-kind, never to be repeated... so shouldn't he just relax and try to enjoy it?

That made him laugh.

Gently, he pressed his thumbs down onto his sore and swollen eyes. Flat on his back, he opened his heavy eyelids, focused on the brilliant white ceiling with its cheap artex swirls, and tried to reassure himself that everything was fine and normal – but it was no use. He couldn't explain it, but something had changed. Something had happened, but he didn't know what, and it made him feel vulnerable and afraid.

'Come on, Ricky. Jesus, man, snap out of it.'

Today was supposed to be a special day; the day he'd dreamed of for years and worked so hard to achieve.

He splashed cold water on his face in the plastic en-suite bathroom and tried to reason with himself. Of course his circumstances were extreme. Of course his senses would be heightened. Today was never going to be just another ordinary day at work. Apart from anything else, it was Sunday, the day of our Lord - and how Richard Randal needed a god now. Any god would do.

And if not a deity, then at least his bloody dad.

His hotel room was located in the eaves of the modern ugly building, at the mercy of the brilliant dawn sun; its first rays easily breaching the gap between the flimsy blinds and the edge of the roof-pitched window. Laser beams, he thought, prodding and poking away at him; ironic then that they should be called blinds.

Not that he could sleep, anyway.

Ricky peered at his frightened reflection in the mirror above a sink that was really too small to shave in – a handy excuse not to have to bother, perhaps?

The horrors of yesterday's experiences at work flooded his mind and made him wince; like a rogue piece of tin foil connecting with a tooth filling. It had been utter humiliation. Little wonder he hadn't slept.

He checked his phone, hoping for a message that might explain everything but there was, of course, no such enlightenment. Just one voicemail from his wife Maggie, reiterating what they'd already discussed and agreed on; that what happened yesterday was in the past, that it could not be changed and so he needed to just put it behind him, move on, and try to relax.

It was pretty thin stuff and hardly inspiring, but he was glad to have it all the same. He listened to it again.

Hey Rick, it's me. Just to say that I love you and I'm really proud of you - and what happened yesterday was not your fault, not really - and I'm still proud of you, and so are the boys.

Her message was well intended, but it was fatally undermined by the use of *not really* and *still*. He appreciated it anyway, especially given that there was no message from his colleague, Patrick - no doubt still smarting also from yesterday's events.

Ricky pinched the bridge of his nose as the painful memory stabbed and goaded him once again. He'd gone over it in his mind, over and over, trying to understand what had happened but he still couldn't explain himself. It made no sense.

No matter, he told himself - he was a professional, and today at work the pair of them would just have to get on with it.

Then, recalling Patrick's last words to him, he blanched and almost had to sit down. He thought for a second but quickly dismissed his fears. There was no way. What Patrick had said was in the heat of the moment and he hadn't meant it. Absolutely not. And besides, today was a big day for Patrick too. He wouldn't miss it for the world. No question.

Good Lord. He better hadn't.

Ricky looked at his watch; two hours exactly until his shift started. His work wasn't really a shift - but it was certainly a grind. Sitting on the toilet now, he slapped both his thighs hard - over and over.

'Come on, Ricky, you can do this. You can *do* this. It's just another day. It's what I do. It's what I've always done and what I do brilliantly. I don't do anything as well as I do this. So what's to worry about?' He was shouting now. 'Nothing. Nothing. There's nothing to fucking worry about. So just get out there. Get this done and enjoy it.'

But his pep talk had a hollow echo. The words were fine and they made good sense, but he needed to hear them from someone else – and someone he trusted. Ideally from his dad, if only the old bastard had hung around long enough. And this terrible feeling he had, that made him feel so completely impotent? What the hell was happening to him?

Ricky squeezed his eyes shut again and massaged his temples, pressing hard into his skull as another wave of anxiousness enveloped him. His breathing was turning shallow and he wondered if he wasn't about to have a full-blown panic attack. He'd heard of such attacks and how debilitating they could be, but he clenched his fists and raised his knees and thankfully it passed. But everything was cumulative and it all added to this feeling of helplessness.

Even his unsuccessful attempt at a bowel movement was a concern. He'd managed a couple of hard and insubstantial pebbles which were fooling no one. Just a precursor and a warning of what was lurking within. A brimming bowel waiting to be evacuated, and no doubt biding its time – something else to think about, then.

And yesterday was his fault as well. Sure, Patrick bore some responsibility; but ultimately, it was his name on the door or on the bag. In his line of work, Ricky owned the glory and the failure. Over the years he had lost count of the people he'd met, envious of the way he made his living.

Living – that was a bloody laugh. His income had been barely sufficient in his twenties and now, two decades on, he was still at it, earning even less and with a family to support. Maggie, two boys and one more on the way.

What the hell were they thinking? Going for the girl, Maggie called it. Heading for a cliff, he preferred.

He left the motel and instinctively scanned the sky to assess the day's weather ahead, sniffing at the air, trying to get a feel. He'd already checked the forecast. A bright day with a swirling and gathering breeze later - little or no chance of rain.

At just after 5am, he had the adjoining motorway service facilities all to himself. Inside was a lone cleaner with a mop in hand and a large expanse of floor - a task with parallels to his own, Ricky thought.

The man was old to be a cleaner and he looked exhausted; hopefully he was ending his shift and not starting it. Dressed in green overalls, he looked up at his visitor and a quiet moment passed between them. The old man smiled broadly, making Ricky feel a little guilty. He smiled back as best as he could.

Now, at least, he was mostly awake and mindful to dwell on only positive thoughts. *Today is going to be a fucking great day*, he assured himself, yawning like a lion.

He loathed the self-help guff that his colleagues seemed to use so effectively. Self-help; the new American science. The legitimate performance enhancing drug, the ability to access one's inner goldmine for untold fame and riches. Endless positive

bullshit. Ricky grimaced, having reasoned a long time ago that a battery with only positive terminals is entirely useless.

He checked his kit, making sure that everything was present and then slammed his trunk shut. He was growing a little angry now, the more he thought about it. No doubt Patrick would be hurting as well - but what he had done was completely outrageous. The sooner they cleared the air, the better.

As he slipped into the driver's seat, he ceded some power and placed a call; it went straight to voicemail and his anxiety tightened a little more. Surely Patrick was up already – and if so, why hadn't he switched on his bloody phone?

He squeezed at his steering wheel as the ghastly thought recurred.

It was about a ten-mile drive to work but at this early hour, the roads hadn't yet choked up with the inevitable traffic. Of course, there was accommodation much closer to the office but it wasn't for employees on his pay grade, and at a push he could even have stayed at home - which he'd considered but decided against. For this line of work, he needed to be away from home and to stick to his routine.

Ricky viewed one of the many cranes a way off in the distance and immediately felt another dollop of adrenaline drip into his bloodstream. There was some movement below now as well; another warning sign of what lay ahead. It was a horrible reality, feeling nervous on your way to work. *Stupid bloody job.*

But it wasn't fair to regard himself as being on a different pay grade, either. His 'stupid' job was actually entirely meritocratic. No nepotism or old school networks at all. No famous offspring miraculously prevailing. His was a numbers game. A pure results business, and technically, he earned the same money as everyone else. Or, at least, he had the opportunity of doing so - and something to shoot for, then.

Ricky drove in through the gates. A man in an orange vest stood sentry and another man pointed to where he could park. The first available space was hidden by a muscular black BMW X6, which was lacking only a turret. On the other side was a shimmering grey Aston Martin with a private number plate that was probably as valuable as the car.

He eased his Astra estate between the two, like a piece of dirty grout separating hand-cut marble tiles. He cranked on his handbrake and got out, carefully.

And so much for his hope that this feeling of dread would recede once he got to work. The way he felt, if he'd been bought a drink in a bar, he would have worried that it might have been spiked. He felt utterly lost and just wanted to jump back into his car and drive home; Maggie would understand.

He laughed – no, she bloody well wouldn't. She'd be furious with him, and rightly so, and quickly he thought of his dad again, and what he would be expecting from his son today.

'Fuck's sake, Ricky, get a grip, man. Get a fucking grip. Just another day. And whatever happens today; tomorrow will be Monday. The world will go on. And so will you...'

But who was he kidding? Today was most certainly not a normal day at all. Today was the third Sunday of July. The final day of the Open Championship. The world's oldest and most prestigious golf tournament. Ricky's first ever Open. His first major championship and in fact, his first event on the main tour in more than eight years.

He needed to hurry now. He slung his clubs over his shoulder; still no sign of his Patrick, his caddie. And Ricky was the first match out this morning, teeing off at 7am.

Thirteen over par and in seventy-second place. Or flat last.

Just an ordinary day, then...

For such a small country, the United Kingdom boasts an impressive and significant coastline. Over eleven thousand miles, in fact; more than Brazil and Argentina combined. And, of course, some stretches of our coast are better known than others. A mull, anyone? On its own, a word which has little use and not much more meaning - until it's combined with Kintyre, and suddenly it makes perfect sense. Brighton is known for its pebbles, an IRA bomb, and now for its gay and green life. Blackpool for its tower and its fat - both chip and human. Hastings for its battle...

Or how about a small stretch of land on the east coast of Scotland? On the Duncur Road, leaving the town of Gullane for North Berwick in East Lothian? A strip of coastal land better known as Muirfield Golf Club, and home, no less, to the honourable company of Edinburgh golfers.

No one does pride quite like the Scots, and Scotland is a proud nation with good reason considering what it's given to the world: television, telephone, radar, whisky, the bicycle, the steam engine, penicillin, haggis (of course) and perhaps the greatest and the most stupid game of them all - golf.

Golf really is a preposterous notion; if it was invented today, it'd stand little chance of surviving. Much like alcohol and tobacco, it'd almost certainly be banned. But the sport continues to thrive because it's become engrained in our culture, without which it would almost certainly be seen off by two formidable modern-day lobbies. Water is a finite resource and so is land, the environmentalists would scream. Sons and daughters of rock stars and other privileged types would fling themselves in front of JCBs to prevent such large swathes of land being dedicated to a single game. And women would surely rally in opposition if their husbands or 'life partners' expressed an interest in this new game which takes four hours to play and can often account for a full day if the bacon roll and post-round pint/s are factored in.

But for now at least, golf lives on. It's a game with a rich history and an array of colourful characters and champions, past and present. It has fashion and artistry. There's an absolute purity to the game, pitting player against the land and the elements. And few can argue against the beauty of the golf course. A manicured

green carpet, sweeping and undulating away as far as the eye can see - and particularly stunning is the links golf course, covered in wet dew each morning with the ocean beyond and a single flag poking above the early morning mist.

Trying to establish which sport is the greatest of them all is a folly and a waste of time. Some will argue for archery, others judo or fencing - and who would argue with them? But quite possibly it can be agreed that golf is the hardest game. A game measured over vast distances and hundreds of strokes; but ultimately players are separated by mere millimetres and single shots. Often a cruel game, and always a tough one; and Muirfield Golf Club is one of the most formidable courses on earth, nestling confidently within one hundred and eighty acres of Scotland, a country where the national flower is a thistle.

Eighteen holes stretching over seven thousand yards with only seventy-one shots allowed; a forbidding challenge for even the very best players in the world - and so a stupid bloody game, then?

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These words played large in the thoughts of Ricky Randal as he made his way quickly towards the clubhouse where he expected to finally see his caddie, Patrick, looking sheepish and contrite.

Sorry, Ricky, mate, honestly. About yesterday. Fuck me, what was that? I don't know what came over me. It was like I was possessed, like it wasn't me, d'you know what I'm saying? Anyway, look, can we just forget about it? Here, give us your bag...

But there was no Patrick, and a new wave of fear gripped Ricky. Just where the hell was he?

He tried ringing again but got his wretched answerphone again and now he knew that something was definitely awry.

He stared at his watch in horror. It was 6am already. Where had the time gone? He was due to tee off at 7am and he had much to do – chiefly, to locate his bloody caddie.

Ricky wanted to get into the clubhouse quickly. He needed some space to think and time to try and compose himself, but just as importantly, he didn't want anyone else to see him lumping his own golf bag around. It was fine on the lesser pro-tours, but it was not OK on the full PGA tour - and certainly not on the final day of the sodding Open.

Just then, Justin Rose emerged from the side of a huge sleek articulated truck emblazoned with the livery of one of the global golf brands. Ricky quickened his step. If he had a golf cap, he would have pulled it down low. He knew Justin from his amateur days, but since then their lives and their careers had diverged wildly.

'Hey, dude,' Justin called.

'Shit.' Ricky muttered to himself, caught now in a dilemma.

'What are you doing? Where's your caddie?' Justin called and seemingly out of genuine interest rather than to score any points.

Justin Rose was a nice guy - a rare breed for such an over-achiever in such an individual sport. Ricky was further unsettled by Justin's use of the word 'dude'; he wondered if the superstar couldn't put a name to his face. After all, it'd been a very long time. Way back in 1997, in fact, when they'd played Walker Cup together.

Or even worse, perhaps Justin didn't recognise him at all. The years certainly hadn't been as kind to Ricky as they might have been. He'd thickened around the middle, his thatch of curls had thinned and his golf scores had kept him completely off the sports radar.

But then Justin bounded over and grabbed Ricky's holdall before he could protest; and even as laden-down as he was, Ricky wished that he hadn't.

'Good to see you, Rick,' Justin said. 'How are you doing?'

Ricky smiled, unsure whether he was relieved or not to have been recognised.

'Yeah, you know. Generally shit.'

Justin smiled. 'Yeah, I saw what happened yesterday. That was really tough, mate, I'm sorry.'

Ricky shrugged it off as best he could. Maggie had first alerted him to the fact that his incident on the 16th hole had made the sports bulletins. Of course it had. And safe, then, to assume that everyone knew about it and no doubt, had enjoyed a damn good laugh.

'Yeah, you know. But there's always today, right?' Ricky offered, without confidence. 'And it's not like it matters, eh?'

'Er...!' Justin began.

'The Open's every year, right?' he added quickly, to highlight his humour and defuse any awkwardness. Justin chuckled along.

'So what about you?' Ricky continued. 'You still playing?'

Justin Rose, US Open Champion, Olympic Gold medallist, former World number one, gazillionaire... and generally, star golfer, now laughed out loud. 'Yeah, you know... now and again. When the mood takes me.'

He picked up on the train of banter quite casually, clearly recalling Ricky's sense of humour - although Ricky would have preferred to be remembered for his golf. Not since pro-celebrity golf on the telly had a golfer made any money from being funny.

'So how come you're here so early?' Ricky asked. 'What are you, one under?'

'Ah, you know. I'm staying in a house here on the course. I woke early - you know what kids are like, and I needed some club adjustments, plus I have some sponsor stuff and press...'

Ricky nodded as if he understood. He was staying at a Travelodge. He didn't have anyone to adjust his clubs, and he didn't have any sponsors either. And as things currently stood, he didn't even have a bloody caddie.

Justin stopped to sign an autograph and have his photograph taken with two Japanese women, who were both wearing fluorescent Marshall bibs and so really should have known better. Loitering to one side, Ricky glanced up at the large leaderboard ahead, to the left of the Muirfield clubhouse.

Rose. 5th place -2

Ricky had him at one under par. *Sorry, mate.* Justin had the game in hand, and had every chance of winning here today - and what a popular winner he would be. About time, England's best golfer bagged himself an Open.

Other early birds were now joining the hunt for photographs; Ricky took his chance to get away. He grabbed his bag back and nodded good luck to his old mate. Justin had stuff to do, and so did he.

'Hey, Ricky,' Justin called after him. 'Go well, eh?'

'Yeah...'

'Seriously, I've a got a good feeling about you today.'

Ricky nodded. *Really? I wish I did.*

'Something in the air. I can feel it.'

'Yeah, thanks, mate.' Ricky waved.

It was a kind thing of Justin to say, but he didn't feel much buoyed by it. In fact, he still felt awful; timid and anxious to the point of nausea. And exhausted too, after his night in his oven loft room with his thoughts pounding his mind and keeping him awake.

Never mind the golf; all he wanted to do was go home to his family.

'...we'll have live updates throughout the morning from the Scottish links, and then BBC Radio 5 live will be at Muirfield with John Inverdale from 2pm when the leaders go out, including the likes of Woods, Rose, Spieth, Fleetwood and McLroy - and we'll stay with the golf until the close of play this evening when the champion golfer of the year is announced. The first pair is due out in just under an hour, including England's

Ricky Randal who achieved infamy yesterday with his caddie on the sixteenth green. Let's hope the pair fare a little better today in the final round...'

Nowadays in professional sport, nothing is left to chance. Preparation is key - and particularly so in golf, where players each have their own routine, adapted and refined over the long course of their careers. But even though their sport centres on the individual player, golfers are not alone; they're accompanied by their agents, managers, therapists, coaches, sponsors and equipment providers, and most importantly of all, their caddie or wingman. Their man within the ropes.

The caddie bears a great responsibility – he's much more than just a guy lumping a golf bag about. Very often scratch golfers themselves, they know the game intimately. They maintain the clubs and they make the correct club available to the golfer, in perfect condition, as and when it's needed. And crucially, they know what to say. They know when to speak and when not to speak, in order to get their man around the course as economically as possible.

And Patrick was not in the clubhouse. Ricky was growing frantic now. Where the fuck was he?

He tried calling him again. This time the phone rang and Patrick finally picked up. *Oh, thank God.*

But then Ricky's world came crashing down around him. And given what Patrick had to say, he spoke with remarkable poise.

'Are you fucking kidding me?' Ricky spat, grateful that the locker room was empty.

'No, I'm not. And no, I can't explain it and for this, I am sorry...'

'Sorry! You're fucking sorry?' Ricky screamed.

'Yes, I am. I'm sorry. So, best of luck Rick. Play well.'

Ricky stared at his phone. His muddled mind was beginning to break down. Frantically, he played the conversation over in his mind as beads of sweat popped out onto his brow. Was this an elaborate joke and Patrick was about to walk in through the door?

But the doors remained shut; Ricky was now distraught. He needed to call someone. He hit contacts on his phone, with his vision blurring as he scrolled down aimlessly. But what was the point? He was in Scotland and teeing off in less than an hour. Who could he call?

Impulsively, he charged out of the locker room and into the bar area, hoping to see Patrick standing there with a big grin on his face, at which point he would have hugged him and then killed him later - after his round. Or failing that, he hoped to see a young assistant golf professional with nothing to do for the day and happy to caddie for him.

But no such luck. The only people standing at the bar were a bunch of old duffers in blazers and odd coloured trousers; they glanced over at him knowingly. The incident on the 16th, no doubt?

Quickly, Ricky headed outside, past some reserved parking bays and around the corner to the pro shop. But then he stopped in his tracks.

The place was stiff with people. It was manic. Of course it was. This wasn't a monthly medal. This was the Open. Justin Rose was chatting with Ernie Els and some other players he didn't know. Young Turks who lived in the gym, looking more like middleweight boxers than golfers in their immaculate outfits. Journalists fluttered about like pigeons waiting for scraps, with a film crew loitering nearby and self-important officials bellowing into their walkie-talkies.

The prospect of entering the shop and trying to hire a caddie was out of the question. *'Sleeve of balls, please, bag of tees, er... the long ones, and do you know anyone who could carry my bag?'* The press would have a field day.

Panic welled within. His mouth dried out and his heart thumped - and unfortunately, it wasn't alone.

Ricky froze as something stirred below. His eyes widened. His most urgent worry now was not his impending tee time, but the pressure against his sphincter. And this wasn't a casual message from bowel to brain. This was no gentle reminder, a suggestion that he might like to consider a visit to a cubicle. This was an alarm and he had precious little time. His absent caddie was, for now, forgotten.

Justin Rose looked over at him curiously, as did Ernie Els, the Big Easy.

Ricky turned and lurched forward like a gazelle that's been spooked and began to hurtle for the clubhouse as quickly as he could. Without a full stride, though; because it couldn't be trusted.

He kicked the clubhouse door aside with a force that might have killed a member exiting at just the wrong time, tore through the comfortable lounge, and dived into the locker room – which, mercifully and strangely, was still quiet. He smashed his way through into the toilets.

At this point, if the stalls had been occupied, he'd have been given little choice other than to prop himself over a urinal or even worse, a sink. An ignominious way to achieve golfing immortality. But thank Christ, there was an open door ahead.

With no time to spare, Ricky dived inside, ripped at his belt buckle and got himself onto the pan as sheer panic and adrenaline began to pour out of him. He breathed out heavily. *Oh, thank God.*

Golfers are frequently told just to let things flow, and in this particular case the relief was awesome, but sadly short-lived.

His body continued to empty and as he went on fidgeting with his phone, he remembered his truly awful circumstances. But who could he call? He looked at his watch again. Just why the hell was this happening to him?

'Shit. Fuckety shit, shit, *shit*,' he muttered aloud. They seemed appropriate expletives.

He heard a water tap being run somewhere in the toilets outside and his spirits sank even further. It meant that someone had overheard his terror. Of course they had - and given his day so far, the man was probably a journalist who now had an idea for his column. Even more likely, it'd be Peter Alliss, the voice of the BBC or Ken Brown, the ex-pro and on-course expert.

Ricky took a moment, hoping that he'd finished and that it was now safe to stand up. He did so gingerly, hovering briefly over the pan before reaching for the loo paper.

A few moments later, he stepped out of the stall with as much confidence as he could manage.

Better out than in, eh?

In contrast to the clamour outside the clubhouse, the toilets were still deathly quiet - which, again, was unusual and troubling. Had he got the wrong course? Or had the other players simply arrived earlier this morning, fully dressed, bowels voided, and ready to play? Were his fellow professionals sitting on their tailgates pulling on their shoes in the car park, contravening one of the sport's golden rules? The dressing room should be a hive of activity already and yet was desolate. Empty but for Ricky and one other person.

The other occupant of the toilets was an old man wearing a green apron - Ricky had seen him scrubbing and wiping throughout the week and had exchanged vague pleasantries with him more than once. He had a kind face, framed by a shock of white hair and a thin moustache, light eyes and an intelligent expression. Maybe sixty or so, and small, not much over five feet. He carried himself with the wiry alertness of an ex-serviceman and looked significantly over-qualified to be attending toilets. For the second time this morning, Ricky empathised with someone holding a mop.

'Nervous?' the old man asked. Casual as you like. The understatement of the year.

Ricky nodded. Yep, shitting myself, as you just heard. There was little point in denying it.

'It's only a game,' his new friend added kindly. 'Anyway, they all get nervous, even Woods.'

Ricky eyed the clock on the wall. Ten more precious minutes had elapsed. His playing partner would now be rolling in the last of his practice putts, having already spent some quality time hitting balls on the range with each of his clubs in turn. His caddie would have washed his irons and placed them in correct order in his bag and

was probably holding a banana at the ready, should his charge need a quick calorie boost.

Ricky's eyes widened as his bowel suddenly twitched again - but then it settled quickly enough, thank God.

The old man smiled. 'Hello. I'm Marshall.'

'Marshall?'

'Yeah, I know - don't ask.' He offered his hand, taking Ricky a little by surprise. He didn't look like a Marshall. The only Marshall that Ricky knew of was an American buddy from university - not an old English duffer like this guy.

More embarrassingly, he realised, he couldn't actually take the man's hand, not before he'd washed his own - and something which Marshall should really have accounted for. He quickly scrubbed his hands clean and flung them dry, firmly ignoring the high-tech dryers which always promise more than they can deliver. Finally they shook hands.

'Shouldn't you be out there, son?' Marshall asked. 'You're the first match out, aren't ya?'

Ricky pulled at his face. He wanted to cry. He didn't even want Patrick to appear now - only Maggie. She'd just hold him and make him feel all right. Or his old man; and he thought of how upset his dad would be if he could see his boy in such a predicament.

Marshall smiled again. He had a knowing air about him. 'It's your caddie, right? After all the hoo-hah yesterday? What is he, a no-show?'

Ricky stared glumly at the little man. Hearing his reality made it even more real and pressing. He had no option. He would have to withdraw from the Championship. This would be humiliating, not to mention expensive, forgoing the twenty one thousand, seven hundred and one euros for finishing last - and this was assuming that he didn't manage to improve on his position.

'How about I carry it for you?' Marshall suggested.

'What?'

'Your bag? Carry your clubs for you?'

Ricky was startled. He stared at the odd little man, trying to process his offer; and when he did, all he could do was to laugh. It was a release - it felt good, being able to laugh. An antidote to the bewildering feeling of pain and uncertainty that had enveloped him since yesterday afternoon.

'You want to carry my bag?' Ricky asked, incredulously.

'What? How hard can it be? I used to be in the army. I've carried heavier loads for miles, and not on bloody grass, either.'

Ricky forced himself to focus. It wasn't the physical side of Marshall that was really troubling him. It was more the man's circumstances. He was on the advent of the most important round of his life, without a caddie - and his best option was a toilet attendant?

'Unless you have another offer, of course?' Marshall asked a little indignantly.

Sadly, Ricky didn't.

'You could always carry them yourself, I suppose,' the old man added, with a mischievous grin.

Ricky thought about this. Carrying his own bag would be impossible. He'd be a laughing stock. A toilet attendant was way better than nothing.

'Are you sure?'

Marshall chuckled. 'Course I am. Why wouldn't I be? It might even be fun.'

Ricky wasn't convinced.

'And these toilets are clean enough, right?'

'Yeah, I guess...' Ricky said, weakening now - something which Marshall sensed and seized upon.

'Great. Then I'm in. Better to be out in the fresh air than stuck in here all day, eh?'

'Yeah, I guess,' said Ricky, almost numb.

Marshall grinned in triumph. But then his face fell. Suddenly he darted past Ricky, looped around the back of him and then came full circle to face him again, frowning urgently.

Ricky gave him an enquiring look.

'What?' he asked self-consciously.

Marshall didn't answer. Instead, he shot past Ricky again but this time, he disappeared into a little office just beyond.

Ricky looked after him awkwardly.

'What size pants are you?' the old man called out.

'Pants?'

'I mean trousers. Trousers. What size trousers are you?'

Ricky's eyes widened. 'What? Why'd you want to know that?'

'What, thirty-six? Thirty-eight?' Marshall continued, rummaging around inside his office. 'We haven't got time. Get those things off. What is it with you lot and white trousers?'

Ricky suspected what the issue was now - and once again he felt like he was about to burst into tears. Obediently, he unbuckled his belt and pulled down his trousers. Immediately he let out a little yelp. His trousers were ruined. A rude jagged line of brown ran all the way from the seat of his trousers right up to his belt-loops with a great deal of splashing on either side.

Whatever score he would shoot today, Ricky was already heavily in debt to Marshall - and he hadn't even picked up his bag up yet.

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Lee Pah was Ricky's playing partner for the final round. On the practice putting-green, the young Korean star handed his club to his trusted caddie and took the stick of gum that was being held out ready for him.

A gaggle of admiring girls watching from a respectful distance, clutching pens and programmes for the player to sign. He pulled his sunglasses on, tugged his golf cap down low and began striding purposefully towards the first tee. The girls didn't even get a glance from the star twenty-year-old.

He looked resplendent in all-white clothes that had been personally tailored for him and never worn before; figure-hugging, sharp, and emblazoned with the names of his six sponsors, all of them fighting for attention and hoping for coverage. Back home in Korea, this would've been a certainty; Lee was the newest national sensation, but for how long. The growth of golf in Asia being what it is, there was a constant and steady succession of ever new and younger sensations lining up behind him. There is no time like the present for the Asian golf prodigy.

There was no real crowd to speak of, on the first tee at five minutes before 7am. Present was the match referee who'd drawn the shortest straw - this being the first match out and with no players of any repute.

A few stewards and marshals were milling about, but, curiously enough, there wasn't a full complement of professional golfers as yet. Lee preferred to arrive onto the tee after his playing partner; it was just a habit that he had developed. (Making himself top of the bill, perhaps?) But today he was first onto the tee and with no sign of the English journeyman he was partnering for the round.

As ever, the starter Ivor Robson was in place. An urbane Scot, the man with the easiest job in the world of sport; that is, to read a list of names out loud. Nice work if one can get it and no doubt applicants to replace him are already lining up since this Open is set to be Ivor's last.

Nevertheless, Mr Robson took his job very seriously indeed, and right now he was feeling greatly perturbed by the presence of only a single player. He had a field of seventy-two to get underway. Television networks across the world and an audience of billions were counting on him.

He glared at his watch. One minute to go and the Open would start with a disqualification. That was a story that nobody wanted to see. But where could Randal be? What could possibly be making him late?

And then, without a second to spare, Richard Randal burst through the tunnel under the surrounding grandstand and onto the tee. He was out of breath, and on his own. It was quite an entrance; everyone present was staring aghast at what stood before them, and this was even without seeing the state of Ricky's caddie.

Marshall, now lagging unseen some considerable way behind him, was clearly struggling. As soon as he'd got under the bag, his knees had buckled and Ricky had panicked. *The Swiss Army, was it, Marshall?* Ricky envisaged the old boy keeling over and dying on him mid-round, and immediately he'd thought to lighten his load, jettisoning stuff from his bag that he could do without. He'd already lost one caddie and he needed to keep this one alive.

Each match at the Championship has its own on-course referee, and with radio in hand the man in question now marched towards Ricky with a sense of indignant purpose.

'Where's your caddie, and what the fuck are you wearing?' he barked, dispensing with the customary handshake, good luck and play well.

Ricky just shrugged. He hardly knew where to begin. *Well, you see, I woke up with this morning with this strange feeling...*

'My caddie's on his way.'

'And the clobber?' the referee snapped, pointing angrily at the offending garment.

'It's a kilt...'

'Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. I can see it's a kilt. But this is a golf course and this is the fucking Open, so what's it doing on you, a professional golfer?'

A little aggressive, perhaps, but it was a reasonable question – and Ricky didn't know where to begin answering it. He glanced over his shoulder, wondering where the hell Marshall had got to.

'Well?' The man demanded.

'Er...'

Ricky dithered. What to say? It was all Marshall had in his cupboard. His choice was a kilt or a pair of plus-fours that he couldn't squeeze into. So it was the kilt or nothing if he was going to make his tee time.

The match referee continued to glare at him. Golf has famously strict rules for what attire can be worn. No jeans, and only tailored shorts with long socks. But did it state anywhere that kilts weren't allowed? But it didn't need to. No exposed knees – and, not-to-mention that Ricky looked preposterous. At worst, it came across as if he was cocking two fingers at the venerable game's long and proud traditions.

Ricky didn't have a golf cap either, but this was always going to be a minor clothing crime in comparison to his kilt. He had a cap in his golf bag and would get to it the moment Marshall eventually made it onto the tee. It would complete his look as a professional golfer and further lighten Marshall's load. A win-win, then?

But matters were not helped at all when Marshall finally crawled onto the tee.

'Here's my caddie now,' Ricky said with some relief as the referee glanced over in the old man's direction. He looked anything but impressed.

He snapped his glare back to Ricky. 'Just what the hell is going on here? Are you taking the piss?'

'What? No. Look, I've had a disastrous morning. I had white trousers...' Ricky began. Quickly he stopped himself. 'It's my knees, isn't it?' His voice faded out into nothing, and he opted instead for his best mournful and pleading look.

'And your caddie?' the referee asked again.

Ricky grimaced. 'He's there.' He pointed at Marshall, who might at least have stood up straight.

'Him, who, where?' the referee barked. Ricky's nerves were shredded already and snapping his fingers, he beckoned Marshall over to him; the old man approached gingerly, as if wondering whether his toilets might have been a better option after all.

'This is Marshall. He's my caddie.'

The ref stared at Ricky. '*Marshall?*'

'Hello, sir,' Marshall chirped confidently.

'Yes. This is Marshall,' Ricky repeated urgently and a little angrily. Marshall was as much as he knew. 'He's my new caddie. I can change my caddie, right?'

The referee's eyes narrowed as he considered his options. His finger was twitching over his radio. It was almost 7am and time to get the final round underway. But this was very much an ongoing situation. Fluid. But for now, the final round of the Open needed to begin and so the disaster on the first tee had to be allowed to proceed. He couldn't hold up the Championship. Beyond his pay grade. *OK, people, let's play golf!*

After a cursory handshake with both players, he began to back away with his radio to his mouth, itching to report in to his boss.

'I'm sorry about the outfit,' Ricky offered vaguely but the referee ignored him. This was all Patrick's fault, Ricky thought to himself, imagining exactly what he would do to his ex-caddie once his round was finished. Take to him with an eight iron, perhaps? Or better still, a two iron.

And then it finally dawned on him. In the mania of the last hour, he'd forgotten that he was about to play the final round of the Open Championship. Suddenly his legs felt heavy and his mouth dried as the match referee continued to gabble into his radio.

Ricky shook hands with his playing partner, in a daze now, and quickly they exchanged match cards. Lee Pah looked just as agog as everyone else. He said nothing other than hello, but there was a little smirk with his caddie which Ricky caught and decided to ignore. It was fair enough. Ricky would have done the same. After all, it was funny. A golfer turning up as though he was late for the mid-week medal and in fancy dress.

One thing was certain for the day ahead. Ricky was going to make the sports bulletins; the early ones, at least, and possibly even the later reports. And not because of his golf.

Chapter One
Richard Randal, ENG
Open Championship + 13
72nd place
Prize Money €21,701
1st Hole
450 Yards, Par 4

'...without getting onto his outfit, which is only going to add to the infamy of one Richard Randal. Certainly not a household name by any stretch of the imagination. Forty-five years of age and playing in his first ever Open Championship.'