

## Three

### Cutting through

Something there is that doesn't love a wall

—Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

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*T*hat bloody fairway!  
It was driving me nuts, this manicured nirvana just paces from our rear windows. We'd moved to reduce our mortgage and because we loved the view from the new kitchen, dining and living rooms, down the fourth fairway of the Eastern Golf Club, but for some odd reason I kept delaying my golfing debut.

There was nothing too exclusive about this establishment, its membership a cross-section of well-heeled multicultural Melbourne. A fifth-generation Australian-Anglo-Jew could waltz in – just find two nominators and write a \$4000 cheque.

It seemed an odd thing to do when we'd just moved to cut our mortgage and drop to one income so that my wife, Diane, could help Madeleine through the final two years of high school – a tough time for any kid, let alone one suf-

fering, as we were later to learn, from bipolar depression.

But at last I did it, and not without spousal encouragement. Golf, we thought, might moderate my addiction to work, might help me to relax. I was fifty-three and had been working like a dog for years. Yes, I needed to relax. In fact, I was absolutely determined to relax. I was going to bend my steely will in leisure's direction – right down that Edenic fairway.

I took a series of lessons with Mick, the Club pro, a laconic guide for the middle of the journey. The lessons were a birthday present from the family, who reasoned that if I knew how to play golf I'd find it more relaxing. Delighted with the gift, I was determined to make a real go of the game so that I could ease into middle age, amble carpeted fairways to the sweet calm of retirement.

Mick seemed just the man for me. He appeared to sense that I was the heady type – or was it the professorial title on the business card I gave him before the first lesson? There was a touch of Zen about Mick, whose First Rule of Golf was: "Don't watch the ball." A lifelong devotee of ball sports, I'd received plenty of advice in my time, but this was a first. "Don't watch the ball." Jesus! And a golf ball came second only to a squash ball as the smallest sporting object I'd ever tried to hit. A tennis ball looked like a pumpkin by comparison.

Mick added: "Golf's a very simple game." So sure was he about this that for one doubt-dispelling moment I believed him.

"All sorts of people will tell you all sorts of things but

99 percent of it is bullshit. There are a million ways to play good golf. It's just a matter of finding *your way*."

*Well, fine*, I thought. "But are you *sure* it would be counterproductive for me to watch the ball?"

Actually, his reasons for turning a blind eye to the ball were quite compelling. Golf, he explained, is about propelling something "out there" towards a target. People get so hung up on watching the ball they turn in on themselves. They get "too introspective." They get tense. They don't let the club head do the work. Being a compulsive self-scrutinizer, it occurred to me that this might not bode well.

He had the form to back these almost mystical understandings. "Watch this," he said, addressing the ball with bemusing ease. "Now I'll close my eyes."

Back and smoothly through came the club. A booming drive arced two hundred metres down the middle of the driving range fairway. A shot played as if by a god – by a man with his eyes closed!

Fair enough, I thought. I'm too tense anyway. This will force me to relax. So I took that bit of advice together with another of his tips: "Swing the club all the way back until it's brushing your left shoulder blade, and then all the way through until it's brushing your right one." A full, fluid swing. That was the thing.

I'm a very determined person. I need to do things well. Even when I'm doing them in order to relax. The scent of success mollifies my twitchy Jewish nostrils, and many years ago I had been deeply impressed by legendary football coach Ron Barassi, when he proclaimed with Delphic cir-

cularity that “Practice doesn’t make perfect. *Perfect practice* makes perfect!” So armed with this and Mick’s injunctions, I set about executing perfect practice in pursuit of perfection, chipping plastic balls in the family courtyard, hitting buckets of yellow balls at the driving range. It was relaxing, getting the feel of the club, anticipating the sweet kiss of blade on glistening puckered white orb, the ethereal arc after effortless mellifluous motion.

Actually, over the years, playing the occasional social game I hadn’t been too bad. But now, despite Mick’s laconic desiderata, I was plunged into the torments of sporting preposterousness. Huge drives, aimed at distant targets, the ball, quite incidental to the club’s magnificent pendular *whoosh*, would trickle off at absurd angles, coming to rest fifteen metres away, at fifty, sixty, even eighty-five degrees to its intended line of flight. Blessed with better than average hand-eye coordination, I was now playing like a man with motor neuron disease. I was stunned. Infuriated. Humiliated. My back hurt. I was not relaxed.

Witnessing my misery from a neighboring tee, a kindly man of my age said: “Like a couple of hints?”

I did not demur.

“Where did you get that swing?” he asked.

“I’ve been having some lessons from the Club pro.”

“Oh, you mean Mick?”

“That’s right.”

“Yeah. I had some lessons from Mick once. He gave me a lovely smooth swing. It felt great. Balance. Rhythm. Let the club do the work. Don’t worry about the ball.

Just think about where it's going. Problem was, it hardly went anywhere. It took me six months to get the club face reacquainted with the ball."

He gave me a few pointedly un-Mick-like tips. "The pros don't take the club head all the way back, so why should you? He's got you collapsing your left knee. You should be able to swing with a basketball between your knees. Keep your head over the ball."

My improvement was marked and immediate. I was on my way, "my nerves were brass or hammer'd steel" – and to hell with Mick!

Funnily enough, in the last of my lessons with Mick – this time playing a few holes on the main course – I felt I should comply with his earlier teachings. Again I played like a dog. Now, apparently convinced that I was beyond help, Mick changed tack. Encouragement modulated into consolation: "You know, you don't have to be hitting great shots all the time to enjoy golf. You've got beautiful scenery, you can chat with friends, and the medicos reckon a good walk beats the hell out of jogging."

*Get stuffed, Mick!* I muttered inwardly.

That was it for golf. Bugger it! And as for the \$4000 joining fee – too bloody bad! We still had that divine view down the fourth fairway.

But that *bloody* fairway! No sooner would my gaze repose there than I'd think of the fee – money down the goddamned drain! – and Mick, with his decisive, priestly, disastrous intervention in my life, extolling the cardiovascular and interpersonal dividends of walking.

And now something entirely unexpected happened. Diane offered to play a few holes with me. We just did it. No score cards, no worries. Just enjoy the scenery and swing. She surprised herself by hitting the ball with some regularity. Studiously ignoring Mick's tuition, I started to play the occasional good shot. And occasional is all you need; any weekend hack will tell you that. So sweet is that occasionally crisp kiss of club face on ball, the sight of it sailing into the green yonder farther than you thought you could ever hit it, that you keep coming back for more. Golf's addictive rhythms.

Soon I was playing a few holes after work. Alone, with no card, no score, no intention of finishing the course, I started to enjoy myself. To relax. On a gentle incline beside the second fairway, where my ball had come to rest in stubbly native grass, I saw the error of my ways: I'd been making golf another project in a life already burdened with projects, objectives, benchmarks, commitments, inauthentic criteria of worthiness and distinction. I needed not to give a shit about being really good at golf: just to stroll those lovely tree-lined fairways and pristine greens, fiddling with my swing at leisure, enjoying the occasional good shot and not worrying about the others. Though still cranky with Mick, I was surprised to find myself deferring to some of his folksy insights: "There are a million ways to play good golf. It's just a matter of finding *your* way."

I tried a few things: shortish backswing; keeping both feet planted; not too much give in the left knee; simplifying everything; orienting myself towards and picturing the

target – yes – but allowing myself to watch the ball if I felt the need; letting the club flow through the ball.

Things started to improve. I was having fun. I'd got the bug. Diane, who sometimes joined me, was enjoying it too.



The back fence, which gleamed new and formidable, was too high for a man of my age and limited dexterity to scale. But it seemed absurd that in order to play we had to drive half a kilometre around the perimeter of the course, cross a major arterial road, and leave the car in the Club car park. The more so because immediately to the right of our house there was an easeway onto the course with two padlocked gates for maintenance vehicles. If only I could get a key to those gates! But it was against Club regulations.

My one “in” at the Club, Phil Wong, an irreverent knockabout Chinese-Australian who'd nominated me, reckoned he could talk the greenkeeper into cutting me a copy of the key. At a barbecue a claret-emboldened Phil outlined his mode of approach to this holder of high horticultural office. He'd take him aside, explain my pained and worthy situation, and appeal to their long history of larrikin solidarity at the Club.

But it didn't work. An uncharacteristically subdued Phil had later to explain that the greenkeeper was “crook” on him about something, and it was a no go. Why not just have a gate installed? I reminded him of the emails from the Club containing stern injunctions against using gates onto the course – even by members. I checked the legalities

with the local council: gates onto golf courses, like gates between neighbors' fences, are a civil matter, to be negotiated by the two parties. But I knew the Club wouldn't come to the table. Its *Club Syllabus* was a dead ringer for that of St Andrews, Scotland, home of golf: pages and pages of arcane regulations. Another document, bearing the deceptively convivial title "Welcome to New Members" lists among its many prohibitions: "Ladies shorts not extending to within 100 mm of the knee." T-shirts must have collars; no logos other than the Club's on any apparel. And so on. Anyway, a gate was going to cost another \$500.

Then it occurred to me that a gate wasn't necessary. All I needed was a secret trapdoor-like entry in the fence through which I could walk straight onto the course with a few clubs and balls, and practise on the fourth fairway and green. I'm no handyman but I reckoned I could do it, and cheaply too – under \$10 instead of \$500. So I purchased two long bolts and butterfly nuts. I had an assortment of cheap tools, screws, nails, and a ladder under the house. I borrowed a cordless drill from a neighbor, and waited for the cover of darkness.



It had been a beautiful autumnal Melbourne day: crisp, calm, balmy.

At seven-thirty, nicely primed by dinner, I carried the standard lamp from the dining room down the garden path beside the house and positioned it by the fence, assembled my collection of tools, and set about executing my plan – a plan so elegant, simple, and meticulously thought through

that I reckoned on being back inside to watch *On the Couch*, a weekly football post-mortem, by nine.



With Peanut the cat in attendance things started well. I began working on a small, three-slatted section right at the end of the fence, where the crossbeams jutted for twenty-five centimetres from the last post, resting on air. The plan was to remove the slats, nail them together with connecting horizontal timber, cut them in half, nailing the top half back to the fence. The bottom half would be a lift-outable trapdoor that fastened and unfastened to the crossbeams by the bolts I'd bought. It would just be a matter of screwing and unscrewing the butterfly nuts, lifting the panel in and out, and perhaps securing it at the bottom with a padlock when not in use.

The twenty-five-centimetre section of pelmet atop the fence lifted off easily enough. Various wrenchings and hammer clunks freed the palings from their beams. I was so focused on the task I only half-noticed the occasional drops of rain. But it didn't matter: at that rate I'd easily make *On the Couch*. Might even have time for a shower beforehand.

Fiddly tasks like this are all about foresight. Check everything at each stage before moving on to the next. In the planning stage I'd leant against the appointed section of the fence to check that I'd be able to fit through the gap I was going to create. It looked tight but about right. Side-on, I'd be able to glide on and off the course in seconds.

Savoring the vindication that would come with my

first slither onto that neighboring wonderland, I turned sideways, lifted my left leg through, bent down to enable my torso to fit between the middle and lower crossbeams, and pushed. About mid-way, my potbelly and barrel-chest wedged rib-crackingly against either side of the aperture, the lower crossbeam setting crippling limits to my intended stoop.

And then it started to rain. Hard. It was bucketing down. My top was immediately drenched. My old track shoes, likewise soaked, started to churn mud in that south-east corner. The mud didn't smell all that good. It must have been a bit like this as Virgil and Dante passed out of Hell via Satan's rectum. But that was the least of my problems.

I squeezed out and stood there in the driving rain, pondering my next move.

One thing was clear. I couldn't leave the job half-done, because vigilant players and groundsmen would be on the course at first light. If they saw a gap in the fence they'd report it immediately to the Club. I couldn't sleep on that prospect. I'd have nightmares about appearing before the Eastern Golf Club Disciplinary Sub-Committee, standing guiltily before them in ladies shorts not extending to within a hundred millimetres of the knee. And I had hairy legs!



Diane had witnessed enough of my handyman endeavors over the years to give this covert operation a wide berth, but as I stood there in the rain, contemplating the misfit between me and the gap I'd created, a kitchen window slid

open and with nicely feigned good cheer she inquired: “How’s it going?”

“Good,” I said. “I’ve got the pelmet up and the palings off. But there is a bit of a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“I can’t quite fit though the gap.”

“*Right.*”

“Wanna come and give an opinion?”

“Not really.”

“Wanna come anyway?”

Eventually she made her way down the garden path and after dismayed assessment suggested that I re-attach the section I’d removed and create a bigger one to the right of the last post. Elliot, age nine, had come with her and wandered into the fray with all the acuity of Tolstoy’s Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* who, seeking the battlefield, is quite unaware that he has stumbled into it. Elliot launched an attack on the fence with a variety of tools in what seemed to be an entirely random manner. He is one of life’s great enthusiasts, but I was in no mood for engagements with the fence that were even more grossly amateur than my own. Wisely, Diane returned to the house, taking him with her.

Without restoring the original palings, I tried to loosen the next lot along to make more room, but they didn’t want to budge, and I’d make a real mess of the fence if I kept widening the gap. The alternative was to cut the lower crossbeam that traversed the gap so that I could stoop low enough to ram my torso through the hole.

The rain continued to bucket down. Peanut had retreated to a dry spot under the eaves, emitting mews of I'm not sure what. Concern? Disbelief? Hilarity? With cats it's hard to know. The dogs, on the other hand, were clearly delighted to have me out there in their whiffy, turdy, bone-strewn domain. The elderly black bitzer, Leo, wagged benignly up at me. Haggis, the exuberant schnoodle puppy, hurtled about, periodically hanging off my dripping sleeves.



As we know, major initiatives have defining moments. Having severed the lower crossbeam, I had arrived at one such moment: if I could not get through the gap now my entire scheme was in ruins, and I'd mutilated our fine new fence for naught.

Gingerly, I started to lower myself again, my right shoe twisting in the now conspicuously stinky mud. What *is* that stench? I wondered. And then I remembered ... Shortly after we moved in, the toilets started to misbehave. Walking the perimeter of the house, torch in hand, I found sewage oozing from an overflow pipe, running down the concrete path beside the house, and settling in the southeast corner of the yard.

I now knew myself to be under multiple threats: from the Club, the rain, raw sewage, and perhaps even the constabulary, who might at any moment be summoned by concerned neighbors.

No point in getting any more drenched, I thought. So I trudged inside to put on a dry t-shirt and a waterproof anorak. As I passed the bedroom, the family, reclining

on our bed, watching the Eurovision Song Competition, asked how it was going.

“Slowly,” I replied.



There were other impediments. Between the southeast corner of the yard and the underneath area of the house, where my tools were kept, sat Madeleine’s trampoline. Since it was Olympic-sized, if I needed anything from under the house I had to edge along the fence’s middle crossbeam, or scramble like an arthritic sea lion over the trampoline’s wet plunging surface, or crawl under it – a manoeuver that Haggis immediately construed as an invitation to play.

But obstacles had to be overcome. It was now 11 p.m. The job had to be done.

Kneeling sideways and expelling air to render myself as svelte as possible, I again addressed the gap. Right shoe twisting, I levered myself in and pushed ... and pushed, and pushed. About halfway I began to fear for my rib cage and to envision morning headlines:

**DONCASTER FATHER OF THREE SURVIVES STORMY  
NIGHT WEDGED IN FENCE**

My anorak’s slitheriness was in my favor and finally, after expelling still more air, I pushed again and was rebirthed onto the Eastern Golf Course, drenched, disoriented but vindicated. I was now in quite good spirits.

I’d gotten used to the rain and was quite pleased at the harm it seemed unable to do me. *On the Couch* was now well and truly over, Diane certainly wasn’t going to come near me, and the dawn I so feared was still many hours off.

I was free to hack and tinker away with my dripping tools, supermarket torch in hand, until I'd achieved my goal. Later, in consultation with my neighbor, I could slightly widen the aperture by relocating one of the palings on our dividing fence.

The dogs were in good spirits too, availing themselves of the wonderland beyond the fence, hitherto merely sniffed from the yard. The most ardent golfer could not be more enamored of that fourth fairway than Leo and Haggis. Soon Peanut joined them. So there we all were, oblivious to the rain, sloshing about in our benighted suburban oasis. An observer might have reckoned our collective IQ at about ninety-five.



There was still work to be done – plenty of it, given that it takes me three tries to do anything with my hands. Nailing the upper section back in place seemed easy enough – until I found that it didn't leave room for the lower section to edge in beneath it and rest on the pelmet at the foot of the fence. So off again it had to come for further modifications.

It was odd out there, ten metres from the family home's secure glow, but with one's back to this vastness, ringed though it was by lights from neighboring houses. What manner of man or beast might prowl these immaculate acres at night? Foxes, feral cats (the lynx of the links?), dingoes, ravenous refugees from the fossil records, spotted leopards, Woody Allen's "wheat-germ killers"? Same-sex psychopaths who roam the darkened greens and fairways, preying upon unsuspecting middle-aged academics hack-

ing away by torchlight in the rain at suburban fences?

A rustle in the long grass between fairway and fence spun me about, my torch beam scanning the undergrowth for skulking monstrosities, but finding only Leo's cataract-clouded eyes glowing milkily in the glare. Haggis flew at my sleeve. Reassured, I continued.

But really, what was this all about? Wasn't there something a touch desperate about this hacking at a barrier between desire and pleasure? *How very me!* How very male. Having begun, I had to finish; but not just on account of the Club autocrats – as I well knew, there were lots of nice and forgiving folk in the Club and, indeed, on the committees. No, once I begin something I *always* have to finish it. It's as if I've put down a deposit on a satisfaction that I think will at last appease my gnawing inner disquiet.



I'd left a container of nails on the central heating unit beside the trampoline. I was reluctant to barge my way back into the yard, but I did need more nails in order to finish, that is to say *really finish*, the job in every imagined detail. So back I rib-crackingly went, squelching in the murk like a suburban Ciacco.

The kitchen window slid open again. This time it was Madeleine, an inveterate bouncer at sixteen years of age, who will only use her trampoline at night when there's nobody on the fairway or green to see her mop of lustrous curly black hair rising and dipping above the fence line. At such times we have to vacate the back of the house because she doesn't like being watched by us either.

“How’s it going?”

“Slowly, but I’m getting there.”

“How long do you think it will take now?”

“Not sure. Why?”

“Well, I’d like to bounce, but not with you there.”

“Darlin’, you’ve just been in bed for two days with a cold and it’s pissing down with rain. No bouncing tonight.”

“But I’ll wear a thick waterproof coat – the one you got in New York when you were a student.”

“Maddie, no nagging, *please!* This is taking much longer than I expected and I’m drenched.”

“Why not finish it tomorrow?”

“Because the t-shirt police will chuck me in the cooler.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“So how much longer, Dad?”

“Jeez, I don’t know. Maybe forty minutes. I’ll tell you when I’m done, and actually it won’t be hard to tell because I’ll come in the minute I’m finished. I’m not planning to sleep in the rain.”

The window slid closed.

I put the nails in a pocket and took the neighbor’s drill this time, re-birthing myself again onto the links. I now had to drill two holes in the trapdoor and through the crossbeam. Through these holes I’d thread the bolts that would fasten the hatch to the fence, secured by the butterfly bolts from the inside. All I’d have to do is unscrew the bolts, push the hatch outwards, slip through, replace the hatch, and stroll onto the fairway.

After the usual mistakes and re-tries the job was done. The bolts slipped into place; I knocked the hatch into position, lifted it out again, and whistled for the dogs. Haggis flew through the gap; the rotund, arthritic Leo wriggled his way through.

I manoeuvred the hatch into position. But how would I thread the bolts through their holes from the inside? *Jesus!* Eventually I found that I could coax them through from under the crossbeam, but with enormous difficulty. And it took ten minutes. In order to get the hatch snugly into place I had to scale the fence and tap it firmly with a hammer from the other side. So there would have to be some fine-tuning the next day after all.

Still, the thing was basically done! It had taken over four and half hours, but it had sort of worked. The pets were back in the yard and I wasn't *all that* cold. I felt a faint glimmer of satisfaction and made my way up the garden path, back into the light. The rain had ceased. Stars twinkled high above the fairway trees. Thence to the shower where I vigorously disinfected my hands with Dettol.

“Are you done yet?” Madeleine called from outside the door.

“Yes, dear.”

“*Yay!*”

### **Postscript**

Some years later, after the trapdoor had given excellent but increasingly uncomfortable service, I did indeed install a hinged gate, hidden by a tree that had shot up near our fence. In June 2015 the Eastern Golf Club relocated to a

new course thirty minutes away, and an international construction company commenced work on a vast residential development that would eventually plonk a two-storey house where our fairway view had been.