

The Golfer & The Pilgrim

A Small Booklet In Eight Stations



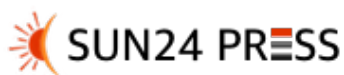
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THE GOLFER AND THE PILGRIM

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I

The golfer stands before the closet and chooses the day's uniform. Soft leather shoes that have never known a true path, a shirt whose collar will remain perfect until evening, a belt that matches because matching, in his world, is a kind of virtue. The bag waits in the hall, fourteen clubs in their numbered beds, each one a small promise that the earth can be struck and made to behave. The house is quiet. The day has already been reserved, paid for, and politely expected to perform.

The pilgrim sits on a low stool and pulls on boots that remember other mornings. The leather is darkened by weather, the soles worn into the shape of his walk. He ties the laces without ceremony. What he carries is little: water, bread, a staff that is only a staff. Nothing in the pack is numbered. The day has not been reserved. It is simply waiting outside the door.

II

The golfer closes the trunk with a sound that is both expensive and conclusive, as if even departure should have good manners. The clubs lie in foam and order. He drives along roads that know him, past gates that open because they have been told to open, and because he belongs to the sort of morning that gates recognize. The course appears exactly where the map said it would: a bright, obedient green, water hazards placed as decoration, bunkers raked

into politeness. Nature, here, has been edited – and charged for the privilege.

The pilgrim steps onto the track and does not look back. A hedge, a dog, a field still wet from the night. The path does not open for him. It does not recognize him. It only continues, sometimes clear, sometimes nearly lost in grass. He walks into a world that has not been mown for his arrival.

III

On the first tee the golfer takes his practice swing, a gesture more ritual than need, performed for an audience of one who is easily impressed. The ball sits on its little throne, white and certain. He addresses it as one addresses an appointment that has already been confirmed. When he strikes, the sound is clean. The fairway receives the ball as if it had been expecting it, which, in a way, it has. Distance is measured. The morning is already becoming a number, which is how this particular morning prefers to be loved.

The pilgrim comes to a place where two trees lean toward each other and the way grows narrow. There is no throne for the next step. There is only ground: root, stone, a patch of mud that will take the print of his boot and keep it. He does not measure the first hour. He only notices that he is moving, and that the air has a taste.

IV

By the middle holes the golfer is walking a landscape that has been taught good manners and then congratulated for learning them. Grass of one height, then another. Trees planted where they will frame the shot. A lake that exists to punish the imprecise, and to look expensive while doing so. He speaks little. The game is a conversation with himself in which every sentence must land near the flag. A cart waits if the legs grow tired, which is a kindness the course extends to those who can afford not to walk. The sun is considered mainly as light for the ball.

The pilgrim crosses a hillside where the wind has not been consulted. The grass is whatever height it chose. Trees stand where they grew. When water appears it is a stream, not a hazard; he drinks from his hands and wipes them on his trousers. His legs are the only cart. The sun is not lighting a target. It is simply on his neck, and he is in it.

V

A bunker takes the golfer's ball, as bunkers are designed to do: a small, well-raked misfortune, scheduled in advance. He steps down into the pale, perfect sand, which has never been a beach and would be offended by the comparison. The lie is awkward. He plays out with the grave attention of a man correcting a typo in an otherwise excellent ledger. When the ball is free again, something in him settles. Order has been restored. The course, having briefly misbehaved, is forgiven.

Rain finds the pilgrim on an open stretch with no shelter but a wall. He stands under the drip of stone and waits, or does not wait, and then walks on with wet shoulders. The path darkens and shines. Nothing is restored, because nothing was arranged. The day is only wetter than it was, and he is still in it, which is enough.

VI

On the green the golfer reads the slope as one reads a contract, looking for the clause that will save him. Grain, break, speed. He putts. The ball hesitates, then drops with that small, civilized sound the hole was built to make. A number is written down, neatly, as though neatness were the same thing as meaning. The round acquires its significance in pencil. He has not merely walked; he has accounted for himself, which is the only form of walking this place quite trusts.

The pilgrim stops where the path meets a rise and the country opens. He does not write anything down. The day has no score. What he has done is only this: put one foot before the other through a world that did not ask to be played. He looks for a while at what is there. Then he looks at the next piece of ground, and goes.

VII

The eighteenth green receives him as the afternoon begins to think of leather chairs. The last putt falls. He removes his cap with a gesture both modest and expected,

the sort of modesty that has practiced in the mirror. The numbers are known. The course, already, is being prepared for the next man who will arrive with fourteen clubs and a reservation, and who will also believe he has been somewhere. The clubhouse waits, bright and enclosed, a harbor for those who have finished a journey that never left the grounds.

The pilgrim comes at dusk to a plain building at the edge of a village. It is not a clubhouse. It is a room with a table, a bench, bread, and a window that looks onto the same path he has been walking, now almost dark. He sets the staff against the wall. His feet hurt in the ordinary way of feet that have been used. No one prepares the road for tomorrow. Tomorrow will be the road, or it will not.

VIII

Inside, the golfer speaks of near-misses and fortunate bounces, which is to say he speaks of himself in the safest available dialect. Amber liquid is poured. The windows look out on a green so perfect it barely resembles the earth, and no one seems to mind the resemblance failing. Someone mentions next week's tee time. The world, for a moment, is plastic, pleasant, and complete – a completeness that will require booking again.

Inside, the pilgrim eats without hurry. A few words pass, or none. Outside, the path continues past the last house, unmarked, unreserved, still itself. He does not speak of what he has left or what he hopes to find. He only sits long

enough to be still. Then, because that is the nature of his day, he will stand again, and the unedited world will be waiting.

X

In the morning the golfer opens the closet again.
The pilgrim ties his boots.

The course is ready.
The path is not.

It's time to leave.