

Winged Shafts

Will Jessup had been the postmaster of Dokes Mills since long before I'd been born. He was a fixture of our little post office, as much as the rusted old cannon out front or the flag flapping in the breeze overhead. His face showed the same signs of aging as the building's ancient clapboards, and his voice creaked in empathy with the door as I swung it open and stepped into the tiny lobby.

"Morning, Grant. Package for you."

There are a lot of exciting moments in life, but there's a distinctive thrill of anticipation that shoots through you when a package arrives from some distant place, as if a piece of enchantment from that faraway land were wrapped up in the parcel with the rest of its contents. Little did I know that wrapped into this particular package were demons; not the grotesquely repulsive demons of Pandora's box, but demons just as wicked.

"All the way from California," intoned Will, half with amazement that I could have any association with someone who watched the sun traverse a different ocean, and half with the intimation that I'd better own up to who it was. The postmaster of a town

the size of Dokes Mills figured he had a right to know all about any unusual occurrences. This one had aroused his curiosity even further than normal.

"My new clubs, Will," I explained. "Special ordered, handcrafted...and autographed by Arthur Cobbett himself."

To be truthful, I had no idea who Arthur Cobbett was. I'd purchased the set of clubs after thumbing through advertisements in a golf magazine. One in particular had caught my attention - a golfer of regal bearing, standing in full follow-through, eyes chasing some rapidly receding ball through the air into the distance. Underneath, a caption proclaimed "Arthur Cobbett, renowned champion, tests his state of the art signature clubs." A rectangular box below requested my name, address, and a check made payable to "Malibu Golf Sales."

"A champion of what?" I'd wondered, but eventually had broken down and sent in the money anyway. After all, anyone important enough to have autographed an entire set of golf clubs, and to have his visage peering out from the pages of a national publication, was surely a champion of something quite special.

My ignorance of Mr. Cobbett's biographical specifics didn't matter. It was more than matched by Will's, who, despite it, nodded and smiled knowingly as if Arthur were his brother-in-law Frank, with whom he spent his weekends sitting in duck blinds and drinking beer.

"Well, alright, but what do you need those for?"

I knew it was difficult for the old man to unravel. There weren't many luxuries that one was wont to spend his hard-earned money on in this part of the Northeast. One needed necessities - a home, food, wood for the stove in the winter, a decent car or truck. And there was some expenditure on entertainment - a rifle or fishing rod, or a bottle or two of something on Friday or Saturday night. People bought golf clubs, of course. But I already had a set. Even if they were in such disrepair that I wanted new ones, why send good money all the way to the West Coast when I could have just walked into Mick's Sport Shop in town, or wrestled the pick-up out to the weekend flea market at the old drive-in theater? Will waited for the answer to these silent, but clearly pressing questions.

My pride battled with some deep internal admonition that I ought to exercise humility, but finally I could not hold back my

announcement. "This is the year I'm going to beat Ab," I predicted, a little embarrassed at my own bravado.

Will's face, rather than relaxing at my clarification into the placid understanding I had expected, only knotted further, into deep concentration.

For sixteen consecutive years, I'd played head to head against Abner J. Doucette in the Dokes Mills Gun and Country Club Annual Family Picnic and Golf Tournament, and for sixteen consecutive years Abner J. Doucette had come away with the trophy. I wasn't a bad golfer. In fact, I was pretty good. But Ab had my number.

That was the most confounding part of it. I wasn't just the second best golfer in Dokes Mills. For even though everyone knew that Ab was without a doubt number one, each year he unfailingly beat me by the minimum possible margin. I don't think he purposely planned this personal torment for me. But still there was The Laugh.

On the surface it seemed innocent enough. No one else noticed the harrowing edge to it. It came to him so easily, as if it weren't meant to bother me at all; as if Ab were just being friendly with his perennial competitor; as if it weren't

designed to strip my soul naked and bare my inadequacies to whoever was watching.

But then again, The Laugh was always followed by a second, deeper thrust of the knife. "Good game, Grant. Guess I won again."

Then a twist. "That was sure a close one."

And always, finally, the fatal reminder of a never-ending combination of hope and despair, "See you next year."

This, of course, was the reason my boast had etched such a bewildered look into Will's face. However, what started as puzzlement began to twist and turn, eventually working its way into revelation, and finally into movement.

"You think you've got a chance this year then, Grant?" The old man looked as if he'd accidentally stumbled onto a secret treasure map.

"Secret" was not one of the more accurately defined words in Will's vocabulary. Any information to which he became privy, due to the continual contact with the public of someone in such

an important civic position, was often as liable to infect the entire town as the most virulent winter head cold. But here was something special, something that perhaps even Will could keep from breathing to the populace.

For the second most popular contest at the Dokes Mills Gun and Country Club Annual Family Picnic and Golf Tournament wasn't the three-legged race, the chainsaw sculpture competition, or the horse-pull. It was gambling; gambling that usually involved both Will and his brother-in-law Frank, who, despite his position as Chairman of the Town Council, was one of the more active participants.

Such valuable information as the fact that I had imported a set of Arthur Cobbett autographed clubs all the way from California was certainly of note. Maybe, this time, Abner J. Doucette, the odds-on favorite, might lose.

"Who knows, Will? This could be the year." With that, I pried open the door to transport my precious package safely home.

A plaintive request followed me. "Now you wouldn't want to go telling a lot of other people about those clubs, would you

Grant?" I chuckled, and sauntered down the street leaving Will to brood over my apparent nonchalance.

As I left the post office out of sight behind me, I played over in my mind some of my losses to Ab, at first in painfully accurate historical detail, but then again, a second time, according to the way I knew they would have developed had I only ordered my new clubs sixteen years earlier.

My pace quickened as I imagined duffed shots turning into perfect drives, and near misses dropping exactly on center into the cup. I moved even faster as I pictured the crowd applauding endlessly, and Frank, as Chairman of the Town Council, praising my virtues as he announced that my name would fill the next empty space on the trophy.

By the time I reached home, I was almost running. I raced into the house, and feverishly tore brown paper from a brown box, hoping to discover the gleaming riches inside.

Blackbeard himself would have been proud. The silver shafts shone like diamonds. The leather grips smelled of

professionalism and authority. Each magnificent instrument emanated strength and flexibility, and the burning brand of my benefactor, Arthur Cobbett, smoldered at me from the handle, as bright and clear as if he were there in the room.

Power flowed through the shafts and up into my hands as I grasped the driver. My eyes narrowed like an eagle's as the putter caressed my palms. I pulsed with confidence as I held the wedge. With the boundless enthusiasm of a child at Christmas, I grabbed a handful of golf balls and bolted out to the yard to bask in the glow of my newfound mentor.

In the weeks that followed, I drilled with my new clubs every day. With renewed bursts of optimism budding inside me, I prepared for battle, and my game dropped by half a dozen strokes. It never occurred to me that the better scores might be the result of a change in attitude. I knew it was the clubs.

So did Will. He and Frank had rounded up a contingent of bettors willing to take Ab, even up on strokes, offering as high as 3:2. I had remained quiet about my change in ammunition, and Will's rare expedition into discretion had ballooned into what stood to be an enormously lucrative endeavor.

Not that either Will or Frank was quiet about betting on me. On the contrary, they eloquently explained to any willing listener that I was sure to win. However, not once did they mention my secret ally, Arthur Cobbett. In contrast to his usual public behavior, Will winked and spoke to me in confidential tones when I met him daily at the post office. He inquired after my health, and latest score, and provided a limitless number of helpful hints on how to win a golf tournament.

During this time, an annual tempest swept the town, growing as each new bet was placed on any of the twenty golfers in the tourney, and splintering Dokes Mills into factions. Children shouted epithets about each others' fathers from opposite sides of the street as they walked to school. Husbands and wives argued even longer and more intensely than usual. It was even said that Old Man Gates had burst a blood vessel and sent Silas Dupree's brand new checkerboard and pieces flying all over the tables and floor of Coot's, the one bar on Main Street.

Thus it happened that as Ab and I stood on the first tee at the Dokes Mills Gun and Country Club, the last twosome of ten, about to decide the fate of an inordinately large percentage of the

gross town product of Dokes Mills by how well we could hit a miniature white ball into a slightly larger hole, most of the townsfolk were looking on. The air buzzed with hushed criticisms of friends and cousins who, after long years of suspicion, had finally proven their insanity or disloyalty by betting on the wrong side.

The Gun and Country Club was a special place. The land on which it sat had been bequeathed to the town sometime near the beginning of the 20th century. Cassie Dokes was the last remaining resident of the family that had made and lost its money running the textile mills for which the town had been named. Her relatives had vanished to other parts of the world when the textile industry moved south to find cheaper labor and local raw materials. Cassie stayed, and died a spinster, penniless except for a few hundred acres of land and a wealth of friends. She left the former to the latter, in the only equitable way she knew how, by donating the entire parcel to the town.

The evolution of the plot into a gun club was natural. Hunters frequented it to enjoy the abundance of pheasant and quail. The gun range came to be located on the same spot that the locals

used to practice their marksmanship before crossing the ocean to fight in the First and Second World Wars.

The addition of a country club was more contrived. Will's brother-in-law Frank, an ambitious youth aiming for a spot on the town council, had sold the taxpayers on the economic benefits of a public golf course.

The wonderfully conceived idea lost something in execution however. The mishmash of architects that comprised the council overlooked the potential dangers of an errant golfer searching for a lost ball in the same vicinity as some future woodsman was improving his aim. Frank himself had nearly been hit, presumably accidentally, by a spray of buckshot. As a result, he was the primary negotiator of an eventual compromise; for three weeks in July, the Gun Club was closed altogether; from Memorial Day to Veterans Day, the Gun Club was open for target practice all day Monday, and mornings until 10:30 on Tuesday through Friday - the golf course was open the remainder of the week and all weekend.

The course had its own especially unique feature, one that it again owed to Frank and his council brethren. Due to further poor planning, later characterized as Yankee thriftiness, the

town of Dokes Mills boasted the only golf course in New England with twenty holes, nine on the front side, and eleven on the back. The last two had been added so that a golfer could finish his round, rather than somewhere out in the woods, in front of the clubhouse where he'd begun his day, and where we now stood in front of the eager throng of spectators.

Frank flipped the traditional silver dollar. I called heads, and was right. Ab hit first, a long straight shot. I followed with one equally as long, and landed mere feet from him. We were off.

We gave the crowd their money's worth. Through nineteen holes, over the course of the afternoon, I played the game of my life. I should say Arthur and I played the game of my life. My new clubs transformed themselves into the weapons of a heroic gladiator, and I wielded them like the champion's name with which they were inscribed. I blasted tremendous drives. I gracefully arced chip shots up and down hills and out of the sand. I even skulled a beautiful flagbound bank shot off the old Dokes family barn. Frank, as Chairman of the Town council and self-appointed arbiter, resolved the ensuing controversy in my favor.

It was my putting blade however, that elicited from me a precision that I'm sure was unparalleled in the annals of the game. From any lie, from any distance, I buried the little white ball. My concentration was unbreakable, and I became entirely engrossed in the game, as if it meant life or death.

It was some surprise to me then, when I finally broke from my trance, to notice that the crowd had dissipated. For as my concentration had grown, as my blades had worked their magic, as my exhilaration had intensified, the weather had done the same. The wind had picked up, leaves darted in and out of and around the darkening shadows under the trees, and an ominous cloudbank as black and mysterious as the deepest corner of the mind of fate had rolled in and blanketed the course. Knowing the certain signs of a full Northeastern gale, the crowd had reluctantly gone home, cancelling bets when possible, or leaving the responsibility to one of those few trustworthy close friends or relatives of verifying fair play and adherence to the rules.

So it was that as Ab and I walked toward the tee of the twentieth hole, as the rain began at first to drip, and then to spatter, and finally to pour in howling buckets onto our heads, even most of the stragglers had vanished, and only a handful of the very faithful remained to witness my one point lead. Not

much, but if I could only hold onto this slimmest of advantages, I would be more than satisfied to defeat Ab by as little as he had so often beaten me. Trepidation welled in my throat as I sensed the potential of what could shortly happen, and I carefully selected a club from my bag.

It was here that Frank tried to postpone the contest. He was confronted directly and immediately however, by Grady O'Kelly. Grady had made one of the larger bets with Frank, six hundred dollars against six winters' supply seasoned firewood, hardwood, cut split and delivered. Moreover, it was rumored that Frank agreed, if he lost, to endorse Grady in the upcoming town council election. After a lengthy discussion, which covered the spirit of fair play, the economic plight of the woodcutter, the reward in the next life awaiting cheaters and liars, and the extent of the powers of the council's Chair, the two reached a tentative accord. The players would decide whether or not to continue.

Ab took no time registering his vote with a quick nod of the head, and all eyes rested on me. This was the moment that I'd waited for, the chance to demonstrate that I had the spirit of a winner. I shrugged, wiped the water from my eyes, tightened the grip on the club I'd chosen, and swaggered toward the tee. As I

addressed the ball, the wind suddenly grew stronger, lightning flickered unseen across the sky somewhere behind the clouds, and a thunderclap sounded, loud and absolute, as if a giant judge had pounded his gavel on an enormous bench. I was certain that this was a verification of the correctness of my decision.

I was soon disillusioned. My ball went slicing deep into the woods on the right. Ab followed with his most perfect shot of the day, clearing the water and sailing down the middle for a good distance, despite the weather. By the time I caught up with him, I had not only lost my one shot lead, but had managed to get behind by that amount. We both lay several yards from the green, Ab slightly closer. I was about to lose the last hole, after playing my best game ever. I hung my head in dismay, ready to give in once again to the inevitable.

As my chin rested against my chest, I saw out of the corner of my eye the inscription on my clubs.

Arthur Cobbett.

The club trembled in my hand.

Arthur Cobbett, *Champion*.

Arthur Cobbett wouldn't be giving up. About to lose one more time to Ab, I was determined to do it like Arthur Cobbett, like a *Champion*. I was going to hit the best shot that I could, no matter how improbable that I could win with it.

I set my feet. I wrapped my hands around the handcrafted leather grips. I let the silver shaft swing gently back, and then accelerate through the air to hit the ball toward the flag I could barely see through the mist and rain. The ball shot upward into the fog, and I lost sight of it.

Now it was Ab's turn, but Ab didn't need Arthur Cobbett's help. He'd already been the victor for sixteen consecutive years.

Ab walked up to the ball, planted his feet in the muddy ground, and began that smooth but irregular swing that had brought him those sixteen championships. Slowly, silently, the club head rose behind him in a gentle crescent, delicately suspending itself for a moment, and then slicing like a knife through the rain to strike the ball and send it away.

It was then that lightning struck. Literally. In the midst of Ab's beautiful follow-through, a single bolt splintered its way

across the sky, and with the precision and finality of a pronouncement from God, struck the raised lightning rod, slamming us to the ground.

At first we couldn't comprehend what had happened. Frank was the first to raise his head. As civic leader, he had a responsibility to his constituency.

"Okay, Grant?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Will?"

"Yup"

Reluctantly, "Grady?"

"Jesus H. Christ"

"Ab?"

Silence.

Again, "Ab?"

Nothing.

"Abner J. Doucette, are you okay?"

The wind whistled. The rain pelted against brown and orange leaves. A wisp of fog floated across the fairway.

But Abner J. Doucette did not move.

Grady ran to where his body lay on the ground. He shook it some, he bent over to listen to its chest, he pulled on its hand, he shook it some more, all unsuccessfully. The rest of us drifted toward the fateful spot, cautiously, lest events repeat themselves.

"He was a good man," eulogized Grady, who had finally realized the vagaries of fate and stood up. "One hell of a golfer."

"Sure was," said Will. "Sure was."

"Sure was," he repeated, his eyes lighting up with a sudden incandescence.

"Was, was, was, was, was," he raved, and hobbled off toward the hole.

As we stared at each other, attempting to decipher this odd behavior, a gravelly shout barked at us from out of the fog.

"There's a ball near the cup!"

"What the...", began Grady, only to be cut off by a second shout.

"There's a ball in the cup!!"

This was too difficult to understand. We galloped toward the place in the fog from which the shouts had come, leaving Ab to lie alone in the rain.

"He's in there Grant. He's in there," strained Will, his aging body barely able to withstand the excitement.

This was the last straw. The old man had surely snapped.

"Who's in where, Will? I attempted in my calmest voice.

"Him."

"Who?"

"Arthur. Arthur Cobbett." He pulled a white golf ball from the cup and held it triumphantly in the air. A familiar signature was scrawled across its dimpled complexion.

"You won. We won. We won the tournament."

Grady fumed.

"What in hell are you raving about, man? Ab Doucette is dead, struck by lightning. His body is right over there, and you're thinking about a golf tournament?"

"But the ball's in the cup."

"How can you say that? He's dead. Your friend is dead. What would Ab say if he could see this?"

Grady was entirely unaware what a fatal mistake it was to ask this innocent question.

"Hold on, Grady." The voice was Frank's. "We all had a lot of respect for Ab, Will included. He was a good man. He was a great golfer. He was the kind of man, the kind of golfer, that never gave up." Frank was building steam, slowly, like a locomotive just pulling out of the station.

"Remember the first Dokes Mills tournament that Will and I set up? Remember how Ab came from behind to beat Grant with birdies on the last three holes, even though he was wearing that cast on his leg?"

Our heads nodded. I winced.

"Remember when that city slicker came into Coot's bragging about how he'd beat about every golfer on the East Coast, and Ab took him by ten strokes before we ran him out of town?"

Our hearts pounded.

"Do you remember, Grady, how Ab played half a dozen holes in the ice and snow in nothing but his long johns and a pair of hip-waders because you told him he couldn't do it?"

Our eyes opened. A tear came to mine.

"Ab was a fighter. A fighter that fought to the last punch, the last stroke. Do you think that if Ab were alive, he'd give up just because Grant hit a good shot? Do you think he'd just walk away?"

Frank paused for effect, but not long enough for anyone to answer.

"No. Ab would try to finish the tournament up right. Ab would want us to finish the tournament that he's been champion of for sixteen years. Ab would want us to end the contest cleanly, so that he could die with *Dignity*." The last word quivered in the air.

Grady thought about this. His mouth opened, as if to speak, and then shut again. He thought some more. He looked at each of us and saw the deep respect for Ab in our eyes. He pondered further. He looked over to where Ab's body lay.

Finally, he looked toward the ball that perched on the lip of the cup, the last ball Ab had ever hit. Even this last shot had been almost perfect, just missing.

Grady straightened up as if someone had dumped a handful of ice cubes down the back of his shirt.

"Why, of course, Frank. Ab would have wanted it to end clean, just like you say."

Suspicion trickled across Frank's face.

"Look at that last ball he hit, Frank. Almost perfect. It's sitting right on the edge of the cup, so close you could breathe on it and knock it in. You know what that means, Frank."

Frank didn't, and didn't want to.

"It means a *gimme*. It means a tie game."

"But he's dead," jumped in Will. He can't hit it if he's dead."

"Doesn't have to. The official Dokes Mills Gun and Country Club Annual Family Picnic and Golf Tournament rule is, close enough that it's sure to go in if he hit it. He doesn't actually have to hit it. It's a tie.

Grady crossed his arms over his chest and nodded his head, his decision irrevocable.

Frank's forehead furrowed, and his thumb and forefinger caressed his jaw. Eventually he spoke.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is a tie."

Grady stood back smiling. Will looked at his brother-in-law as if he'd lost his mind.

Frank looked at me.

"Technically, of course, the shot isn't a gimme until Grant says so, but we've already seen today what a sportsman Grant is. Surely, he'd allow it."

I stared back quizzically.

"So, it's a tie. The two best golfers in Dokes Mills have battled it out for twenty holes, and it's all even-steven. A push. A tie."

"But that's not a fitting end to a tournament."

Now it was Grady's turn to wax skeptical.

"You've seen the trophy," Frank continued, "sitting in the foyer at the entrance to the clubhouse. A beautiful trophy." Again a pause.

"There's one great thing about that trophy. It has one name, one single champion engraved into it for each year. One single champion."

Grady now provided the whetstone for his own execution.

"Well what, Frank, are we going to do about it? Ab's dead. It's a tie game. We can't change that."

Frank's heavy wheels began their slow churning again.

"No, we can't change the fact that Ab is dead. It's too bad. He was a good man. But we can do what we've done every other year in the past that we've had a tie after twenty holes."

The blade was poised to strike.

"We'll hold a playoff."

"A playoff?" moaned Grady. Will was wringing his hands.

"A playoff," said Frank.

"There are other things that we could try. We could say that the ball has to be replayed, because of interference by an unnatural event. We could say that Ab has the right to hit again because the lightning messed up his shot. We could call the game in favor of Grant and say that the lightning bolt was an Act of God and not to be questioned."

"But God's not here to help us make a decision with the certainty that would have made Ab proud. We need a playoff to decide the rightful winner."

Grady made one final lame attempt.

"You can't decide that. It isn't right. The game's a tie."

There was no use. Frank roared along the tracks.

"This tournament has been held for sixteen years. Families look forward to it. It's important to the economy of the town. It's important to every man, woman and child in this town. It's important to the memory of Ab."

"We have a responsibility to make sure that the results are determined in a way that's fair. We have to ensure the integrity of a tournament of this caliber. As Chairman of the Town Council, as a man responsible for the well-being of the Citizens of Dokes Mills who depend on this decision, I insist that we have a playoff."

Grady hung his head, defeated.

"What kind of a playoff?"

Frank smiled.

"The traditional club playoff will be used - closest to the pin."

This is what my package from far away had led to. Somehow it wasn't right. I'd chased Ab Doucette for sixteen years, and now I was about to have a playoff with him, and the only reason I had a chance to win was that he was dead.

It was with a sense of sadness, and a hint of shame, that I dragged my Arthur Cobbett clubs to the ninth tee to prepare for this final indecency. Will and Grady put Ab's body in a golf cart, and followed along. Frank supervised. The cart jolted about in the rain, Ab flopping back and forth in a macabre dance.

Despite the apparent obviousness of what should have happened next, the small gallery was silent. Lack of resolution had still managed to leave a trace of anticipation in the minds of the spectators.

I pushed the tee into the ground. I looked over at Ab, sitting slumped in the golf cart, and wiped another tear from my eye. I walked over to the cart, almost hoping he might get up one last time and play. He didn't. I walked back to the tee.

This was finality. This was resolution. This would be the moment after sixteen years in which I finally beat Ab. That's

what Frank and Will and Grady expected to happen. That's what I expected to happen.

That's not what happened.

As my beautiful new club was poised high in the air in mid-strike, Abner Doucette got me again. I'd heard stories that such things could happen. I'd heard something like it myself as a youngster, skinning frogs we'd caught by the duck pond.

In the middle of my backswing, Ab's lungs collapsed, forcing air out through the body's throat. The others said it sounded like a belch more than anything else, but I knew what it was. The Laugh. The Laugh that he laughed every time he beat me by that paper-thin margin.

For when I swung, distracted by this final haunting cackle, I barely caught the tiniest piece of the ball. I watched in horror as it spun in circles on the tee, in what seemed to be agonizingly slow motion, and finally plopped off to land an inch and a half behind its starting point. I'd lost a playoff to a dead man.

Call it coincidence. Call it fate. Call it nerves. That's not what it was. For when I looked over at Ab I could see that look in his eyes, even as he slouched there, dead, both mortal and immortal.

I didn't hear Grady's shouts of excitement as he cavorted around the cart and tried to congratulate Ab. I didn't hear Will swearing one long mighty curse, the sum of every epithet he'd accumulated since birth spewing forth in a single rambling, unending stream. I didn't hear Frank standing in the rain, reciting a mindless soliloquy to no one, his voice stuck in an empty monotone, a blank stare on his face, his fervor dissipated. I only know these things from the stories I heard over and over when I finally got up the courage to crawl into Coot's, ashamed, beaten, and infamous, prepared to accept my just verbal punishment.

I only heard Ab. "Good game Grant. That was sure a close one. Guess I won again."

But this time, as I watched the ball spinning in its tortuously endless spirals, there was no "See you next year."

A lot has happened since then. Grady won himself a spot on the council, with Frank's endorsement. The two are still occasionally found sitting in a duck blind or over at Coot's, discoursing on politics, or reliving the heroic deeds of Abner J. Doucette.

Dokes Mills has a big, brand new post office. Will is semi-retired, but still spends a few hours a week sorting a little mail and, more often, gossiping with customers.

He still greets me Saturdays, his voice creaking as if the old wooden door had never been replaced by a shiny new glass one.

"Morning, Grant."

Now and then he adds, "Package for you."

I no longer rush home with it however, anxious to unleash whatever evil lurks inside. I let it sit for a few days in the kitchen, or out on the porch. I unwrap it slowly, carefully, when I have to.

And, whenever I can, I send it back.