

THE KNOCK-AROUND

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(Lights come up on JAKE, middle-aged, dressed in smart casuals. He carries a golf club. He lines up a couple of imaginary shots and plays them. Then he looks out at the audience.)

JAKE It was Liz got me into it: she said I must have something besides work. I go up the club most Saturdays. I usually play with Russ, only of course Russ tells his old lady that it's Thursdays and Saturdays. I've got to cover for him. He's juggling two fancy women already and some mornings he gives the receptionist a bit of work experience behind the photocopier. Honestly, half the blokes in this club are at it: there's only me like a mug, still kipping at home in me boxers. Well, one Saturday, we're in the members-only bar - Russ is taking the piss out of me 'cause he was two holes up - and who do we see there, standing by the photo of Gleneagles, but Calvin?

Now Calvin was the one in the gang at school you could never quite bring yourself to get rid of. The kid with one roller skate. Of course it didn't matter when we were all living on the council estate and you could tell Calvin's gaff by the crisp packets and old axles in the front garden. But as you go up in the world he gets to be an embarrassment, like an early photo of you. Now, bloke like that, who always had his tee-shirt ending at his ribs for that belly-dancer midriff, how they gonna let him in here, amidst the Aquascutum knitwear and Lamborghini set? Where's he get the money? When he finally got booted out of the Scroungers' Lounge – sorry, Social Security – he got a job sitting in a Portakabin at that car park next to B & Q. Now you'd think work was the primal catastrophe for Calvin, but no: he was dead keen. Just after he started he told me that they'd given him a cap, and a kettle, and then he says to me – absolutely straight - *Of course, I won't let success go to my head.*

(JAKE puts his club in a golf cart and sits down.)

JAKE But there he is, in the members-only bar, in brand-new Nick Faldo cardigan and Rupert the Bear trousers. He spots us, comes over and he's got a big grin plastered across his dial, and he tells us he's had good news. *Have they classed laziness as a disability, then?* I ask. Well, I'm not so far wrong at that. Turns out Calvin's missis, Oonagh, the one who worked at that fruit-packing warehouse: well, a load of pineapples got stacked counter-clockwise or something, and they bust loose. And BOFF, she's standing right under them. Bruised up a treat, she did. Out-of-court settlement: insurance, disability benefits, the whole package. Like getting the jackpot on a giant fruit machine. Mind you, this isn't news to Russ: it turns out he's already agreed to fit them a jacuzzi.

Calvin asks us what we're having and gets out a wad of readies like he's paying a lap-dancer. *Do yourself a favour, Cal*, I say confidentially, leaning across the bar, *get yourself a credit card and run up a slate. You're not at a car boot sale.* Cal don't blush, he grins: he's glad to learn the rules of the game. Well, I'm happy for him and Oonagh; no, piss off, I am. Let the DSS keep them in truffles and Dom Pérignon, paid for by sods like us who do twelve hours a day with a toolbox and our name on the van.

Course the trouble is, Oonagh can't leave the house much. They've told the insurance she can't go out without a stick. She also gets panic attacks: she did a very good one in Aldi's a while back, it went viral. Calvin had to jack in his prestigious car park job to look after her, which means sitting at home watching her eat another bar

JAKE of fruit and nut that's the size of a breadboard. So they're stuck together on a collapsing sofa driving each other mental and she tells him to get out and take up a hobby.

Now the the thing is: the insurance people don't just check on the one who's had the accident: it's the whole family – any sign that you're splashing money around like a drunken sailor and they have you bang to rights. Only Calvin is onto their game. He leaves his council house and goes up the community centre. He keeps his golf kit in a locker there. Plays a few rounds of dominoes then does a bunk out a back window. He changes into his smart togs in the gents on the recreation field and strolls in here with his hoodie and denims stuffed at the bottom of his golf cart.

Calvin then asks me to do him a new kitchen – that's my trade: kitchen fitter. I started as a plumber but Liz said kitchens was the way to go. Monday morning I'm there measuring the place up. I show Cal the catalogue: all chrome and fossil grey surfaces, with concealed lighting in case anyone thinks of making a break for it – he says it looks gloomy. Between you, me and the draining board I think he's right, but it's what people are buying nowadays. Gullwing, slate, pencil, aubergine. Only Calvin, he picks out bubble-gum pink and pina colada gloss. Oonagh comes into the kitchen, treading a well-worn path to the fridge, and she asks could I make it a bit brighter. So I say yeah, and when I get back to the yard I dig out some gold-look Roman-style taps from the era of *Up Pompeii* that I thought I'd never shift. I bring them back, and they love them.

Well, it's about this time Russ rings me up and says Saturdays are out for the foreseeable, he's got a shed-load of work on. Yeah, yeah. Honestly. You'd think he had enough birds on the go already. Then I start to wonder: why's he not telling us about her?

JAKE Not telling the old lady is one thing, but not telling your mates? Come off it. What, is he jealous? Does he think we'll all want a piece?

Anyway, that's our regular game kippered, as I don't have a partner. Oh yes I have.

(JAKE picks up the club again.)

Calvin's there every Saturday, and no-one else will play with him. Stand on me, he is so *bad*. I mean, he practises, don't get me wrong. He practises, he just doesn't learn.

(JAKE mimes a few practice shots, and indicates how to hold the club.)

I show him how to select a club, how to hold it, how to stand, how to judge the wind: he nods, takes it all in, then he goes up to the ball and straight off the club turns into a monkey wrench. People giggle when I come in the members bar, I know it.

One time, after he nearly brains me with a five iron, I almost lose me rag. I tell him if he ever wants to win a game, he's got to shape up. You've seen what he's like: flab peeking through his shirt buttons like a kid playing hide and seek. I say to him he's got to get a proper diet and he's got to do exercise. For the first time he looks worried. Nobody in his house ever does exercise: his kids are all taking orders from their X-boxes and Oonagh's sampling the Tia Maria and jellied fruits and watching an Olympic-pool-size telly. But he toddles off to Sports Direct: gets air-cushioned trainers, Bruce Springsteen sweatband, grey jogging bottoms - the whole deal, and he's out there puffing on the street every day like he's on the run from Fatso Prison.

JAKE And it pays off. He actually starts to get – well, less bad. One afternoon we've gone round in record time, under four hours.

(JAKE puts the club down.)

I'm at a bit of a loose end: I've promised the old woman I wouldn't work Saturdays, so I go home early knowing Liz will tell me about one of her things. She's doing some course at the moment in fusion cookery: dinner is a couple of squid mud-wrestling in green ginger sauce. It wasn't so bad when it was just wine: I mean, that's not like eating, is it? You can have a sip and if you don't like it, you can wash it off with a bit of onion. But when it gets to the food... Course I tell her it's smashing. I mean, she's got nothing else to do all day.

Calvin's more serious next Saturday, hardly says anything, but he's playing a lot better. At the end he asks me to arrange a four: him and me versus Russ and a partner. I'm not too keen, but Cal looks so determined I cave in and give Russ a bell. I've hardly seen Russ the last few weeks and I've started to get an uneasy feeling about him. I remember – it was Liz and my wedding anniversary. Twenty years. We had a big bash at the club, and Russ – I mean he just give her a kiss and said she was looking terrific – nothing out the ordinary, a kiss like General de Gaulle give a bloke with a medal, but I just felt a bit of a shiver – knowing what a tool-artist he is.

And when's the best time to call round, but when he knows I'm out? And he knows, with Calvin, I'm not going to be going round in five minutes. Cal and I could

be in the bunker while Russ is with my old lady, driving down the fairway and sinking
JAKE his final putt. I mean, Russ is a mate: but only above the waist.

(JAKE brings out the golf club.)

So anyway I fix it up with Russ, who'll bring along a client of his who's thinking of having a solarium put in. Next Friday we all meet up on the links, and Russ says, smiling and squinting into the sun: *Fifty sovs a hole*. Russ has been playing for years and he always cleans me out, but I can't back down.

(JAKE lines up and plays an imaginary shot.)

Still, at the first hole, Cal's not looking too bad. Russ is so surprised he hooks his shot into the rough and it's one up to us. We get sand-trapped in the second and it's one all, but I'm thinking, *well, even if we lose, we ain't gonna get slaughtered*, which is what Russ likes to do. By the tenth hole Cal and me are two down. Number ten is by the lake and I can usually ricochet off a seagull and in for an easy four. There's a bit of woodland though, I don't want to veer off into it.

(JAKE plays another shot and is evidently pleased with it.)

I give her a drive shot, and she's onto the fairway like a homing pigeon. 'Play it easy,' I tell Cal, 'just get her further down the green and let me chip it in on the next go-round.' If we nail this one we might pull through, only, when it's Calvin's turn, suddenly he morphs into the Calvin of old -

(JAKE demonstrates.)

JAKE he swirls round quick like he's trying to surprise his own arse, and he wallops the ball right into the jungle. Russ and his partner smile: Cal's back on form, and they should be parting us from a few portraits of Her Majesty after all. Cal goes in after the ball, and then there's silence. Like he's gone down a swamp. I call out, then I go down there looking for him, and so does Russ. Only, soon as Russ steps into the glade Calvin yells and drops on him from a tree. Yeah, he'd been up a tree, hiding. And now he's on Russ, *KER-RUNCH*: fists, feet, knees, elbows. Russ shoves him off and has it away on his toes but Cal's after him and chases him into the lake. *Splash, glub*, it sounds like Cal's landing a giant trout. I'm transfixed, and then I run in after them: I grab Calvin's shoulders and I say: 'What's the bleeding game?' but he shakes me off and gets stuck in again. But Russ isn't asking any questions. And then I realise. Russ has been giving the business to Oonagh. Maybe they've been splashing in the jacuzzi together. Calvin must have clocked them that afternoon we came back from the golf course earlier than normal. If only I hadn't helped Calvin improve his game, he might never have found out about them.

They struggle on to the shore and Calvin reaches for a wedge what's lying on the ground but I step on it. That could be terminal. He leaves the club there, but *ker-bam ker-chunk*, he's back in like a pub car park sumo wrestler. Well, after the shock's wore off Russ starts giving it back, and they're toe to toe, but, what with all this exercise, Cal's got in pretty good shape; while Russ – he's only built up one muscle. He'd have a chance if he could punch with it. Cal's on top of Russ, and is mixing his face up like he's making a cake. I look round, a bit jumpy. If anyone from the committee saw us now we'd be out on

our arses. I bung the caddy a score and he turns and does a spot of birdwatching in the

JAKE other direction. I know, I know: I ought to wade in and give Cal a smack. But I mean, all said and done, Russ was dipping his missis. Calvin's entitled. Them's the rules.

(JAKE puts the club down.)

JAKE I get out me phone and I give Oonagh a bell, and tell her to run, cause Calvin's coming home and he knows. Of course he must have known for a while, only he hadn't said nothing so he could set up this game and have a go at Russ. But now he might go home and be on top of her like a ton of loose pineapples.

Anyway, I go back to Liz that evening and tell her what happened, only when I get to the bit where I give Oonagh the tip-off she says: 'You should have kept schtum.' 'Do what?' I say. 'Let her take what's coming,' she says. 'Lardy bitch deserved it. Why've you got to stick your oar in?'

I look across at her. Vicious her eyes are. Harder than copper ear-rings. I wonder who it is I've married. I mean she'll say *They ought to hang the bloody lot of them* about eco-warriors or peace protesters, but not about people we actually know. I wonder if she's jealous of Oonagh getting Russ – no, no.

(JAKE looks round. He picks up the club.)

I look round at the kitchen. It sort of feels like I don't recognise this black and chrome mortuary for vegetables. I envy Cal his gaudy breakfast nook where it's so bright you couldn't see a man wearing a high-viz vest. I don't know, maybe I hadn't had enough sleep...

(JAKE takes a wild swing.)

I take out a cactus in a pot on a shelf.

(He takes another wild swing.)

JAKE Then it's a multi-coloured spoke wall clock.

(And another.)

JAKE And an earthquake mirror. Then I empty the fridge and do a high wedge shot on a packet of smoked and dried elk sausage.

(And another.)

 The photos of Liz and me on holiday in Eritrea. The pictures of the kids in posh blazers.

(He starts hacking with the golf club, like a man chopping wood.)

 Then the basalt work surface that looks like that weird black box that makes the apes go mental in that old movie.

(Grunting, he hits it several times, evidently to no avail.)

 Still, that volcanic black mixer tap can go.

(He hacks wildly at an imaginary tap.)

 Liz is screaming at me but I don't care. (Grunting and hacking.) Everything has to be - top-end and – up-to-the-minute - with a seal of approval from the Oslo Design Fair. - I hate everything that makes a sodding *statement* about me...

(JAKE steps back then takes a run at the tap, screaming Samurai-style. He hacks at it savagely. He grins. Success.)

JAKE BOFF. Off goes the tap and spurts like a champagne bottle that can't stop. I turn and grin at Liz. She is sobbing. *My lovely kitchen, my lovely kitchen...*

Russ don't come up the club no more. He's left his other half, the two side dishes and the receptionist, and he's set up with Oonagh. He tells me he hadn't planned on doing her at first. Then one afternoon they'd got talking and then he found he was kissing the places where her face was bent out of shape. And now his face is wonky as well, so they're a perfect match.

But I still go along there sometimes, when I'm not at the marriage guidance with Liz. Cal and me had a round again last Saturday and we get to the tenth hole. He takes a wild chop at the ball and it flies into the woods again, and off he goes after it. I wait, but he doesn't come out. After a while I go in, treading a bit softly to be honest. And there he is, leaning against a mossy tree, sobbing. I'm not surprised: when Oonagh did a bunk after getting my phonecall, the insurance people, who were just about to give up, snapped her zooming down the road with two duffel bags under her arms. So there's no disability payments, he's in schtuck with the cops, the DSS and the insurance: everything's tits up. I think he might be having a breakdown and, after a moment, I put my hand on his shoulder. Then he points to the ground and I look down and I see the ball, what's got itself lodged between the roots of the tree. He's picking up club after club, lining up the shot, swearing, stamping the ground like a water buffalo. Finally I say: 'Kick it into the clearing.' He looks at me goggle-eyed, like I've sworn in church. 'Go on,' I say. 'You've earned it.'

