

The Gift

A story about finding a better score
in golf and life



Richard Monette

The Gift - A story about finding a better score in golf and life

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To my soul mates,
Blanche, Lizbeth, Zoé, Max and Jazz.
I have always felt your love.

Thank you –
To all of you who have provided me with feedback along the way,
I greatly appreciate your support.

Finally, a very special thank you to my friend and editor
Printer Bowler
who taught me so much.

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part one

the players

"Nerve, enthusiasm and practice are the three essentials to success in golf. But to be great requires the gift..."

ROBERT "BOB" FERGUSON
BRITISH OPEN WINNER 1880-1881-1882

Irving Pirsig Jr.

The tournament had ended more than an hour ago. The press tent was overheated and tempers were getting short.

"Where the hell is he?"

"I bet he doesn't show up!"

"Yeah, maybe he ran away, like his caddie..."

Like all the reporters, I was anxious to hear what Pirsig had to say about his round. Suddenly, a clamor erupted at the back of the tent and spread throughout the room like a brush fire.

"He's here! Pirsig's here!"

I rose from my chair on the stage where the press conference would take place. I could see above the tightly packed herd of journalists, all the way to the back of the tent. A tournament official held open the piece of white tarp that served as a door.

"Back away!" he barked at the crowd. At the thought of leaving without having a chance to get an explanation from Pirsig himself, the reporters moved out of the way as best they could.

After a moment, the official turned and signaled his colleagues to come in. Six or seven officials formed a protective ring around Pirsig. At least I assumed it was Pirsig. All I could see was the top of a flat white cap.

The officials pushed and shoved through the crowd of reporters, and inched their way up the aisle. About halfway to the stage, the small group came to a complete halt. The reporters at the back of the tent had closed in behind Pirsig and his escorts, and those in front had stopped in their path. No one could move. As the officials yelled to people to clear the way, Pirsig looked up at the stage. It was as if the shy golfer needed to assess how much longer he had to endure this pandemonium. As he raised his head, I caught a glimpse of his glazed blue eyes, and a chill ran up the trace of sweat on my back.

The reporters began elbowing their way to the side again. In a few moments, the procession would reach the stage and the press conference would begin. I sat back down and reviewed my notes. The officials finally delivered Pirsig to the front of the room and escorted him up the three steps to the stage. He sat down on a gray metal chair behind a table, his tanned hands on the blue tablecloth. With a crumpled cue card in hand, I stood up and went to the podium to the left of the table where Pirsig sat. I covered the top of the microphone and cleared my throat one last time, then I began:

"As you know, my name is Thomas Morrison, and as the main sponsor I would like to..." It was as if my words had bounced off an invisible wall at the edge of the stage. The crowd kept shouting to get Pirsig's attention. I tried again:

"Gentlemen! Let's try to proceed with some kind of order. One at a time please!" I shouted. And, once more, my voice was lost in the loud noise of the crowd. The reporters wanted Pirsig and if they didn't get to talk to him soon, I wasn't sure what would happen. I backed away from the microphone and looked toward Pirsig, sitting behind the table. It was the first time I had been this close to him. He wasn't particularly good looking, handsome maybe, with his short, thick brown hair, his lean muscular face, a slightly crooked nose and metallic blue eyes. But he had something else — he looked like a man who had survived a voyage to hell. Someone who knew that the worst was behind. As one reporter would write the day after the tournament: *"Irving Pirsig Jr. deserves his nickname. Yes, he is a freak, but in the most beautiful sense of the word. Pirsig looks like a man who has faced his own demons, and won."*

Pirsig looked back at me. I shrugged my shoulders to signal that I had given up trying to calm the crowd. Pirsig nodded. He raised his

hands and the mob quieted down. He pointed to a reporter at the front of the stage, which ignited another uproar and a deluge of camera flashes.

"Mr. Pirsig! Over here! Over here!"

"No! Here, Pirsig!"

"What happened out there?"

"Yeah! How did you make that last shot?"

"Are you going to turn pro?"

"What happened to your caddie?"

Amidst the cacophony, Pirsig tipped back his cap, wiped beads of sweat from his forehead, and waited. Gradually, the crowd settled just enough for him to finally speak.

"I'm glad it's over. I'm happy that I fulfilled my quest." These few puzzling words fueled a new outburst:

"What's over?"

"What quest?"

"What's a quest?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I fulfilled my quest. That's all," Pirsig reiterated as he removed his cap and scratched the top of his head. The reporters kept coming, but Pirsig said nothing more. At least, until one lone question pierced the room like an arrow and roused him out of his silence:

"Mr. Pirsig, is there anyone you would like to acknowledge for your great performance?"

Shielding his eyes from the bright lights, Pirsig looked to the left of the stage where the question had come from.

"You're right. I must. I'd like to thank Sammy, Faith, Ben and Hennie."

"Who are these people?" the reporter followed up. We all anticipated Pirsig's explanation. Instead, he put his cap back on his head, pushed himself up from his chair, and came toward me.

"Thank you for everything, Mr. Morrison," he said, his right hand extended. I rose from my chair and shook his hand. I should have said something. I had so many questions to ask him, but in the confusion of the moment, I kept quiet. Pirsig turned away and limped down the stage. He signaled to the official not to bother. Alone, he began the trek to the back of the tent. The mob still

harassed him with questions, but this time they parted to let him through.

The strange press conference that ended the first Morrison Invitational was the last time Irving Pirsig Jr. was ever seen at a professional golf tournament.

Thomas “Tom” Morris

This story is about Irving Pirsig’s quest, but first, let me introduce myself. Morrison is not my real name. I was baptized Thomas Morris, or Tom. The name was my father’s idea. He thought the famous name would inspire me to follow in the steps of “Old Tom.” My father never made it as a golfer so wanted me to make it for him. My mom warned him that with a name like Tom Morris, the other kids would make fun of me. But he never listened to my mom or anyone else – he was as narrow-minded and stubborn as his great wealth allowed. Thomas, “Tom” Morris I would be.

For the early part of my life, I made my father proud. I weighed more than ten pounds when I was born. I walked when I was nine months old and I hit my first golf ball at seventeen months. My dad never missed an opportunity to remind me how blessed I was. “You will never have to worry about money, son. Just focus on golf and school and you’re set for life.”

I truly loved golf, but I despised all the blarney around the game. To mold me into the next great Scottish golfer, my dad locked me into an elaborate schedule. Except for the few rounds I played before school some mornings, every other minute of my day was accounted for. From the opening bell of school to the time my head hit the pillow at night, my life was a whirlwind of lessons, practice and sermons from my old man.

To the old bastard’s credit, I must admit the lessons paid off. No one could hit the ball like I did. Not the other kids I competed against, not the few pros around the club, and especially not my father. Every week, we played one match. I don’t think he really enjoyed golfing with me. His only purpose was to make me tougher. How I dreaded those games. He made fun of me and criticized me until I was almost in tears, but to his credit, he never pushed me too far. Every time, he stretched my resistance and then backed off before I broke down. This sick strategy worked. One day when I was thirteen, I realized I had become deaf to my father’s insults – as if he didn’t exist for me anymore. For the first time ever, I beat him.

That taste of my father's blood got me addicted to winning. It was all that mattered. I became the club and the county champion. I was the prodigy that made the members of our old club so proud. But, along with my petty fame came the resentment and jealousy of my opponents, who were also my schoolmates. Bearing a name like Tom Morris in Scotland was as pretentious as being christened Joe Dimaggio in Brooklyn – I couldn't make any mistakes. My name became the twisted gift my father had envisioned – it isolated me and pushed me to win at any cost. But for me, that name was a curse that helped turn me into the stubborn son of a bitch I still am to this day.

My only real friend was Grandpa. Once or twice a year he interrupted his world travels and came to visit us. While Grandpa was around, I was out of bounds to my father's army of instructors. Grandpa made it clear, "Let the kid play!" And, since he held the biggest piece of the Morris fortune, my father grudgingly obliged. While Grandpa was around, he was my teacher, the golf course my school and golfing our only concern.

Grandpa showed me a side of the game that I had never heard about. He'd traveled around the world to study the greatest golfers of his time: Vardon, Sarazen, Jones, Hogan, Armour and all the others. But he wasn't analyzing their swing or their psyche. Instead, Grandpa was looking for something a bit different. A peculiar side of the game, you might say – he was on a quest to solve a mystery. Something he called "the ghosts of the game."

Grandpa was a captivating storyteller. His favorite stage was our old clubhouse. Once in a while after our rounds, for reasons known only to him, he would give me the signal. "This place is a stinking bore, little Tom. Want to live it up a bit?" My heart pounding with excitement, I nodded my approval. Over the years, I had become Grandpa's accomplice. The show was on.

Grandpa would raise his head over his right shoulder, cup his mouth with his left hand and shout loudly enough for all to hear:

"I tell you, little Tom, this damned game is full of ghosts. It's infested with all kinds of goblins and demons..." And it never failed. For a few seconds, the clubhouse went completely silent. The few who weren't surprised were the old bartender, trained by

years of his eccentricity, some regulars who had listened to Grandpa's stories before, and me – his straight man. Everyone else was instantly captured by Grandpa's bizarre tale and the conviction in his thunderous voice.

Now that he had everyone's attention, Grandpa held forth in a grand manner.

"The great golfers, little Tom. Morris, Jones, Hogan... do you know why they were so great?" I would shake my head, setting up his answer.

"They're haunted, little Tom. Haunted I tell you!"

"You mean by ghosts? That's impossible Grandpa. There are no such things."

"Nooo, little Tom, don't insult them. You've got to be careful. These damned ghosts are everywhere. There could be one or two of these buggers in this room right now!" he warned me as he probed the rafters with a look of terror on his face. "I tell you, the greatest golfers, they are chosen. The few who fully dedicate their heart and soul to the game, those are the chosen! They are helped by ghosts! That's why they're so good, little Tom."

At which point Grandpa paused. Took a sip of whiskey while his audience wondered if he was crazy. But it was too late. By then we were all caught in the lure of his extraordinary tale. Even me.

"I swear, little Tom, I saw them with my own eyes. I traveled everywhere there was a great match to witness. I went up and down these damned isles we call home. I even crossed the Atlantic to the Americas, on my search for these mysterious forces. I watched all of the great golfers, and I swear to you little Tom and to you all, this game is full of bizarre influences that we do not yet comprehend!"

Then, Grandpa would take a tattered old notebook out of his breast pocket along with a pair of reading glasses that he meticulously wiped with his club tie. He then wet his index finger and thumb and slowly turned the yellowed pages of his notebook until he found what he was looking for.

"There it is! I first noticed the phenomena in 1926. Here's what I wrote back then: *Jones plays like a god. He is completely oblivious to the world. It's like he's surrounded, protected by some kind of an invisible shield...*"

He would leaf through the old notebook some more. "Ah, here it is again," he emphasized with a backhand slap on the open page. "In 1927, Bobby won the Open again and this is what I wrote about it: *Jones is in such utter control of his game that one might think he is being advised by an army of invisible caddies who have explored every inch of the course. An army of invisible caddies...*"

As if he'd proven his point beyond a doubt, Grandpa would extend his right arm until his old notebook was an inch from my nose and then snap it shut.

"Come on Grandpa, that's all Blarney. No one else has seen those ghosts but you! If they really existed, we would know about them!"

"Your suspicion is well taken, little Tom. I used to doubt myself. For the longest time, I denied what I saw. I wasn't ready to admit that these entities really existed. But it all changed in '53..."

"What happened in '53?"

"The great Hogan won the Open at Carnoustie. It was magical. The more I watched him, the more I had to admit he was surrounded by a strange haze. I didn't want to believe, but I elbowed my way closer to Hogan to see them better."

"And what did you see Grandpa?"

"Just like Jones in '26 and '27, Hogan was in some kind of a protective bubble. The gallery, his playing partners, nothing else existed. It was just him and the course, and yet I felt he was not alone. I kept my eyes on him and gradually the mysterious haze took shape." To reassure himself he had captured his audience, Grandpa stopped and waited for someone to coax him on. And someone always did.

"Come on, old man, tell us what you saw!"

Grandpa would turn to whomever had spoken, raise his drink in gratitude and continue. "Some vaporous human shapes," he spit out, "I almost fainted when I realized that Hogan was surrounded by ghostly beings. Not only that, it seemed to me that he was talking with these entities. As he walked up the fairway, Hogan never looked straight ahead. His head was always tilted to his left shoulder." Grandpa would then stand up and mimic Hogan's determined walk. "In between each shot, Hogan mumbled a word or

two, waited for a few seconds and shook his head as if he was being advised by an army of supernatural caddies. I swear, these beings counseled him to victory. It was an awesome thing to behold!”

Grandpa would go quiet and take another sip, as we all fathomed the implications of his weird story. And then, in a jolt, he would surprise us once more.

“I know what you’re thinking, all of you! But be careful before you go out and seek these mysterious powers to improve your own game. These supernatural buggers can be nasty. They can turn on you in a second.”

“What do you mean, Grandpa?”

“It was Hogan again. Just a few years ago at the ‘55 US Open. I traveled across the ocean to witness the magic once more, and I wasn’t disappointed. Again, I saw the ghosts, but this time they weren’t around Hogan. Nooo, this time, they were all around his opponent of that day, Jack Fleck. It began on number five of the fourth round. Fleck was well behind Hogan, but these buggers transformed Fleck’s game. A poor putter for most of his career, Fleck suddenly couldn’t miss. All of his putts fell. Fleck tied Hogan with an incredible putt on the last hole. There would be a playoff the following day.”

Fleck’s charm continued during the playoff. He putted like a god and led Hogan by one shot as they stood on the eighteenth tee box. I got closer to the two warriors and they seemed to be in two different worlds. Fleck was radiant while Hogan looked frail, almost sick. I could see the crippling fear in his tired eyes.

Hogan had the honors. He needed a great drive to have a chance to beat Fleck and win his fifth US Open. Hogan addressed his final drive for what seemed an eternity. He waggled and regripped a dozen times. The ‘Hawk’ had become the prey. And then, the unimaginable happened. Hogan slipped on his downswing and sent an ugly duck hook into the rough. The US Open was over. It was eerie. Hogan never missed like that. It was as if the great player had been pushed by someone or something. The gallery was all in shock, except me. I had seen the energy around Fleck and I knew he couldn’t lose that day.”

“Come on old man, how come no one else saw what you swear

you saw? How come no one else ever talked about these ghosts?"

"I believe that everyone who witnessed the match that day knew something strange was happening. I sensed that some of the other spectators actually saw what I saw, but they didn't talk. Imagine if they had."

At this point, we all pondered the same thought: 'What if these ghosts really existed?' But Grandpa would have none of this pensive mood. He would stand up with his tweed cap over his heart, and call us back to a more joyful mood.

"I swear to God almighty and to all single-digit handicappers out there, for they must be saints, that I'm telling the truth. With all of you as my witnesses, may I lose my swing if I'm lying!" As we all applauded his performance, Grandpa would raise his whiskey in a final toast: "To these old buggers! May they help you all on your quest to find your own truth and your own damned freedom!"

"To the old buggers!" we all replied.

I loved Grandpa and his stories. I went along and played the role of his straight man, but after awhile I began to believe him. On our way home after one of those nights, I opened up to him, "How can I become a chosen one?"

"It's not that easy, little Tom. The ghosts don't just appear when you call them. You've got to pay your dues and then maybe, just maybe, they'll smile on you."

"Please tell me what I have to do, Grandpa. I'll do anything!"

"Just play every shot as if it were your last, little Tom. Don't worry so much about winning. Instead, savor the pleasures golf will bring to you. But also cherish the deep misery it will throw upon you. It is in these moments of doubt and despair when you question everything that they might appear. When you have struggled enough by yourself, as Hogan did, they will come to your help. Don't worry about finding the ghosts. They'll find you. "

"How will I know when they come?"

"You'll know, little Tom – through the counsel of a stranger, through a feeling that will come to you, through the smile of a beautiful girl... who knows? But they will guide you. Just trust me, trust yourself and the game, little Tom, always trust the game."

"I don't understand," I would answer in despair.

"You're too young to worry so much, little Tom. You've got time. We will play another round tomorrow and maybe then you will learn a bit more."

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was too young.

But I was impatient and I had to know. At night in my bed, I prayed for the ghosts to choose and help me. All my childhood I waited for a sign, any sign, but none came. Maybe I looked for them in the wrong places. As my youthful innocence passed, I got tired of waiting and I chose not to believe in Grandpa's ghosts anymore.

And then, in the fall of 1957, a few days after I turned nineteen, I received a letter from Grandpa.

"I write to wish you a happy birthday, little Tom. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I'm playing the last few holes of my life. But don't be too sad, I had a great life. My only regret will be not seeing you one last time. You have always been my ray of light in this world and it's time you found your own freedom. Please, run away from your father. He doesn't understand the game. Take this gift and go study abroad. Find your own way, nothing else matters. Forever, Grandpa."

In the envelope, Grandpa had slipped a cheque that would more than cover any university education in the world. A few days later, he died in a hospital in South Africa. His body was flown back to Scotland to be buried.

The day after Grandpa's funeral, I packed my bags and sailed to America. Without a word or a regret, I left my family and my name behind – I became Thomas Morrison. I had serious business to attend to, other than a stupid game full of imaginary bogey men. I went to university, studied hard and turned my attention to making money. My own money. I made more than I'll ever spend. Away from my father's grip, my Grandpa's love and golf, I was haunted no more.

It wasn't until the first round of my tournament – The Morrison Invitational – that my Grandpa's stories caught up with me. I was twenty-nine years old and held the world by the balls, as they say in the USA. I owned my own brokerage firm and the taxes we were paying were too high. "Sponsor a big event. It's better than giving the money to the tax man," someone suggested. "Why not a golf tournament, Mr. Morrison? You like the old game..." another

er added. And so the "Invitational" was born*.

We wanted to attract the biggest names in golf. "The twenty-four premium golfers on the planet!" was the pitch from the agency who organized the tournament for us. But only twenty-one accepted our invitation.

"Let's go for the top amateurs in the country" was the next move, and two more golfers accepted our invitation. Three weeks before the tournament, we had one last spot to fill. That's when one of the agents suggested something different. "I saw a young golfer at a small-time open in California a few weeks ago. Pirsig was his name. Irving Pirsig Junior. He plays a different kind of golf. Like no one I've seen before. He's going to be really good one day. Why not give him a chance? Who knows, if he plays well, it would add an underdog twist to the show. You always need an underdog."

"Whatever," I answered, star struck by the big names who would play in my tournament.

In my company's tent, where I entertained some of the clients who had made me so wealthy, I watched the first round on television and caught a glimpse of Pirsig. I was immediately taken by the unknown amateur wearing an old fashioned flat white cap. "Just like Hogan used to wear," someone commented.

Pirsig was playing well, but something else was taking place. It was exactly as Grandpa had described so many times. I could see a vapory haze forming all around Pirsig. I shuddered as a familiar chill ran down my back. In a moment, I was returned to those nights by the fireplace in the old club house back home, when Grandpa told his weird stories. Was I dreaming or were the ghost stories really true?

I ran out of the tent and caught up to the gallery following Pirsig. Up close, I clearly saw the spirits twirling around Pirsig. Did Pirsig

.....

* The one and only Morrison Financial World Invitational took place in 1968. Our initial goal was to build another Master's, but that didn't work. The year after we sold the concept and the rights of the event to a competitor and made a large profit. *Tom Morris.*

know about the ghosts? I wondered. Was he aware of them? Maybe in some way he could help me solve the mystery I'd buried years ago. But when I faced him later after his press conference, I didn't have the courage to talk to him. He gave me an opening, but there were too many journalists and clients around. What would they think if I asked Pirsig about ghosts? Instead, I looked away. Pirsig walked out of the press tent and disappeared from golf and public life. I let Pirsig go because if I had talked to him, if I had asked him about my Grandpa's ghosts, I would have plunged myself back into all the uncertainty and doubt I had left in Scotland ten years earlier. I found many excuses to bury my Grandpa's stories for another thirty years. My business, a short-lived career in politics and a couple of ruined marriages kept me busy. But as I became richer, I also grew more bitter with frustration.

Despite my incredible wealth, I had not found any kind of peace. Every time I slowed down enough to listen to myself, questions and doubts jarred me. I felt an emptiness. Something was missing in what I had lived so far.

When I turned fifty-eight, I suffered a second heart attack. I realized that I might not have that long to live. I realized that I had to find Pirsig and talk to him. In some ways, he had lived the life I should have lived myself. I still had so many questions about the strange events that took place at the Morrison Invitational so long ago.

It took me a few months to locate Pirsig, who was living quietly in a quaint little house on the Oregon coast. I found him one fall day a couple of years ago, playing on the beach with his pack of dogs. In one glance, I recognized him by the unmistakable limp that rocked his waist to the right with every step, just as it had when he played in the Morrison Invitational. This time, as our eyes met, I offered my hand. Pirsig was just a few years older than I, but looked much older. He was very thin, yet his blue eyes still exuded the same uncanny serenity.

"Thomas Morrison, Mr. Pirsig. It's truly a pleasure to see you again."

Unfazed, Pirsig shook my hand.

"What brings you here, Mr. Morris?" I smiled at Pirsig. I was surprised and grateful he had used my real name. It felt so natu-

ral, coming from the old champion.

“Stories, Mr. Pirsig. Old ghosts stories.”

“Well, if it’s a good story you are seeking, you came to the right place. Come on in.”

For six days, we sat on Pirsig’s deck as the waves lapped below the pier, and he shared his amazing story with me. At the end, I promised Pirsig that I would get his story to as many people as possible. I hope it illuminates you as much as it did me.



part two

the quest

"From now on, ask yourself, after every round, if you have more energy than before you began. 'Tis more important than the score."

JOHN STARK,
SCOTTISH GOLF PRO

Irving Pirsig's Dissonance

A few moments after we sat on two blue Adirondack chairs on Pirsig's deck, I asked Pirsig, "How did it all begin?" Pirsig raised an eyebrow.

"You don't waste your time, Mr. Morris; you get straight to the point."

"Always did, Mr. Pirsig. That's how I made my fortune. But there's something else. I don't have much time left."

"Neither do I, Mr. Morris," Pirsig said, looking at the waves.

"How?" I insisted.

"I like your question, Mr. Morris. Most would ask why I retired after only one pro tournament. 'You had a chance to get it all — fame fortune, glory. How could you drop out?' they would ask. But not you, Mr. Morris." I smiled back at him and Pirsig saw my impatience. He sat back in his chair and began his tale.

"Well, let me tell you, Mr. Morris, that my life changed when death looked me straight in the face. When death winked at me and sent me on my quest."



I went to university because that's what my friends did. I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do besides play football, lacrosse, hockey and hang out with my pals. For the community work required to complete my degree, I volunteered at the "Y" and coached a kid's basketball team. I had a blast and so did the kids. The professor who super-

vised the program told me I had a talent for teaching and that's how I chose my career. I completed a degree in kinesiology and then went to teacher's college. After university, I moved around for a few years, going from one temporary teaching job to another. Then I applied for a permanent job teaching high school phys. ed. in a small mountain resort town and I got it. I was twenty-three and I thought that was the beginning of my career.

I was a good teacher, but not a passionate one. Not yet anyway. Like most of the students and some of the other teachers, I didn't really care. The routine and the hours fit my lifestyle at the time. Life was easy; the resort town was like university all over again. Tourists flocked to the mountains for skiing and fun and the place offered what they were looking for. There was a bar on every corner and my pals and I had our circuit. On Monday it was Tequila night at the "Tijuana". On Tuesday it was two-for-one at "Morrisey's Pub". And so it went as we drank our way through the week.

At the end of my third year of teaching, I gathered my cronies and we hit the town to celebrate summer break. At the end of the night, I woke up in a strange place, naked and with a stiff neck. With every breath I took, I felt a glob of phlegm and tequila rattling in my throat. I spit it out before I threw up. Holding my head with both hands, I looked around, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Gradually shapes emerged, and then something nudged me on the left leg. I jumped. My heart pounding, feeling sick again, I looked back to where I had been sitting a few seconds ago. There seemed to be something or someone lying on the floor. I squinted and rubbed my eyes and then I saw her cute little butt squirming around. Too hung-over to walk, I crawled on my hands and knees towards the butt. She was blonde, had a butterfly tattoo on her left cheek and a bottle of tequila in her right hand, but I didn't know who she was or what we had done last night. I caught a whiff of the tequila and got sick. I threw my head to the left to avoid puking on her and banged my forehead on the door frame. I got up to escape the smell. I stumbled around in the dark and gathered whatever clothes I could find and ran out of the hotel room, pants unzipped, shirt and shoes in hand.

Once outside, I swallowed a good dose of cool mountain air and felt sick again, not from the booze, but from something else within me. Something really deep and scary. I don't really know what or why, but something had shifted inside.

After that night, I kept going to the bars and pubs with my buddies for a little while, but I didn't drink much anymore. I'd nurse a beer for hours. I'd force myself to laugh at my friends' stupid jokes, but it was like teaching, I didn't care. I hung out because I didn't know what else to do. A door had been opened and a sneaky uneasiness had crept into my consciousness – I had become aware of my own futility. As much as I tried to stay eighteen forever like all the other guys I hung out with, I was a young man living an old man's aimless life.

A few weeks later, I gave up the bar scene and drinking altogether. I had to find another drug to replace the booze that numbed me to sleep. I went back to an old passion – sports. Complete physical exertion became my dope. I ran every morning and rode my bike with my two dogs after school. After that, I watched television until I fell asleep on the couch.

But my quest really began on a Sunday in late September. I know it was a Sunday because every Sunday I left my dogs at home and rode my bike on the pavement for as long as I could.

That particular Sunday, I was only a few miles outside of town, at the end of an eight hour ride. It was late in the day and I was racing home before complete darkness fell. As I approached a small hill, suddenly my stomach froze and the hair on my body stood on end. My numbing fatigue gave way to profound fear. I broke my furious pace and switched to a lower gear. Legs spinning, I slowly topped the small hill and heard a train on the other side. Muffled by the trees and the hill and my furious all-out final sprint, I hadn't heard the rhythmical noise of the train. If I'd continued my blind dash, I'd have ridden right into the train. I stopped at the top of the hill, took my right foot out of my pedal strap and looked up to the ceiling of stars that was appearing in the dark blue mountain sky. I was covered in sweat, my heart pounding and my stomach still gently trembling from fear. I waited, refreshed by the draft of cool air coming from the train's wake.

Instinctively I turned to face the road behind me as a pickup truck came roaring over the top of the hill. The driver saw me and the train at the last second. As he veered to the right to avoid the tracks, he clipped the wheel of my bike, propelling me toward the train. One of the big iron wheels then caught my back tire and threw me against a post where the missing railway crossing sign should have been.

During the impact, my senses were heightened and the events unfolded in slow motion. I clearly heard every sound. I smelled the gas coming out of the pickup. I felt my right leg shatter. I saw my tibia break the skin of my right shin. As I lay there, I didn't know that my other leg was also fractured. As the noise of the train diminished, an intense pain rushed up my spine. I bit my lip and slowly rolled my head to the side. Through my tears, I saw the red pickup wrapped around a tree. Then I passed out.

I woke up in the hospital sixteen hours later, my entire body throbbing.

"Where are my dogs?" was the first thing that came out of my mouth.

"Don't worry, they're still with your neighbor. He dropped by a few hours ago and said he would keep them until you get home," a nurse answered from behind the beige curtain that surrounded my bed. I couldn't see her, but I could see my right leg wrapped in bandages on top of the sheet. I remembered the accident, the bone breaking the skin and I was puzzled that they hadn't put a cast on my leg. The nurse finally opened up the curtain and, as if she had read my mind, answered my question in her precise, robotic way.

"Don't worry, a brand new metallic frame inside is holding your leg together. It's the only way it's going to heal. You broke both your tibia and your fibula." In response, I looked at my other leg in a sling. The nurse anticipated my next question.

"Hairline fracture of the tibial plateau. Immobilization for three weeks. The good thing is that you didn't damage your spine or your neck. You're lucky."

"What happened to the driver of the pickup?"

"He wasn't so lucky. He died."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Did you know him?" she asked.

"No."

"I can tell you, then, that he was quite drunk. Anyhow, just rest and if the pain is too much, squeeze this little button." She demonstrated, "It will shoot a dose of painkiller in your intravenous." It took only a few seconds to feel the effects of the drugs. I smiled back to the nurse and she walked out of the room.

I enjoyed the high for a few moments and then took some time to evaluate my situation. The nurse had summed up my sorry state – I was a cripple. A very confused cripple. Strangely, stuck in bed, I felt no sorrow, no angst. Instead, I felt like a kid who stayed home sick from school. Sheltered in my bed, I was freed from all obligations. The internal discomfort that had invaded me for the last few months seemed to have vanished with the accident.

As time went on and the doctor reduced the amount of painkillers, my sense of well being didn't go away: it grew. It didn't make any sense to me. I should have been depressed, but instead I felt a heavy burden had been lifted from my shoulders. "Why do I feel so relieved?" I kept asking myself.

I stayed in the hospital for almost three weeks. My only pleasure was to escape to the hospital rooftop in my wheelchair. For hours, I stared at the mountains far away, to the rhythm of the throbbing pain in my right leg. During one of those escapes to the rooftop, I began to understand why I felt so relieved. The accident had jerked me out of my numbing routine. It had giving me time to really think about my future, time to figure things out and change my life in any way I could. I had stared death in the face and got away from it alive and almost intact. Now, the scary part was that I had no choice but to jump into the unknown and grab on to whatever I found there.



Pirsig settled more deeply into his chair. I observed him as he sat silent. After a few minutes, I drummed up the courage to break the silence. "What was that feeling, that lump in your stomach, that made you give up drinking and hanging out with your friends?" Pensive, Pirsig responded with a question of his own.

"Do you like music, Mr. Morris?"

"Music? What kind of music?"

"Any music."

"I guess."

"You know when you're listening to an orchestra and one instrument is slightly out of tune?" I nodded.

"The other musicians almost cover up the bad note, but it creeps up every so often. With time, you forget about the orchestra and you keep looking for the faulty note."

"A dissonance?" I suggested.

"Yes! That's exactly it, Mr. Morris, a dissonance! The lump in my stomach was like a constant dissonant note that I tried to silence, but it kept creeping up until it took over my life." Pirsig fell silent for a while more. I waited. I didn't want to rush him. I watched his dogs play in the waves until he spoke again.

"I just remembered something important, Mr. Morris. Something I had never really realized before. On the rooftop in my wheelchair, I remember that in my search for an explanation, I cried for help."

"And?"

"I got my wish, Mr. Morris. I got the help I asked for."

On these words, Pirsig got up slowly and walked toward the kitchen. Our first session was over.