Playing Without Fear

I long for the game of golf. Even as I sit in the room of my third-floor apartment, a concrete-walled prison of carelessly placed papers, some of which I know I’ll need to find in coming weeks, and the intoxicating aroma of days old laundry, I desire it. The freshly mown grass of expansive fairways that seem to stretch on for miles, the crisp contact of golf club making its vicious sweeping attack on a little white ball, or the perfectly familiar taste of the *Romeo y Julieta* I’m smoking that day, it’s a feeling vital to my survival. I am being unfair; my room isn’t all that bad. I do have two pathetically insufficient windows, however one looks directly into a brick wall, though if I position myself just right I can see about one square foot of the sidewalk below. No, the only hope for escape lays in the other window, the golden child if you will. The three foot wide opening leaves nothing to be viewed but everything to be desired, yet there is hope in the form of a small field of grass, the only connection to the outside world I one day hope to inhabit.

But golf serves a different purpose. It isn’t merely an escape from the complications of daily life but one of the only truly happy memories I have of my dad. It was a running joke we had... I would tell him how outdated and insufficient his golf clubs were, a set of faded gold, bladed irons from, what I considered, the Stone Age and he would retort without missing a beat, “You joke now, but someday these will be your inheritance.” It’s kind of funny, in an almost delusional sort of way, when I think back on it, joking about one’s own mortality. I guess it was just his humor. Either way, I never hoped to come into possession of those God-awful things. The brand name was exceptionally ironic - *Bel Air* - possessing an almost oxymoronic signification in its
interpretation, both an upscale suburb of affluent inhabitants and a pathetic excuse for a set of golf clubs. For me, they had come to mean the latter. They were nearly impossible to hit, producing a malevolent shockwave rendering the hands numb and lifeless after a few labored hacks, and owned a sweet spot no bigger than the tip of a sewing needle, challenging even the most skilled golfer to make solid contact.

My dad wasn’t capable of producing anything resembling a successfully composed golf swing. He resorted, instead, to a symphony of imbalance, contorting his body in a hard-fought battle against himself, arm skewed in what had to be the most uncomfortable position ever constructed by the human body, slumped over at the waist with knees bent well below parallel as if attempting to leap from the ground with all his force. His head was a bobble-head of movements from takeaway to finish, ducking and weaving, just trying to get out of the way of the rest of his body. The follow-through was possibly the most cumbersome, producing an aggressive jerking motion as he tried to slow down the impossibly rapid momentum he had so tirelessly built up through the progression of his swing. But, by some miracle, he was still able to put the club-head in contact with that little white ball and even though he rarely found any surface resembling a fairway or green, the fact was that he was trying. His swing was a quirk, a veritable unorthodoxy, but it was more so a reflection of his personality, one of nerdy coolness. I knew he didn’t truly desire to play the game of golf, not in the respect that my brother and I did. He enjoyed it because his sons enjoyed it. My dad used golf to rebuild a bond he lost when we stopped playing baseball, his true passion, a passion he constructed through years of coaching the game we grew up playing.
Those years had long since past. The days of driving to that dirt-filled parking lot on Saturdays and Sundays, walking through the front gates, and stepping onto the pitcher’s mound were gone and in its place stood a haven of grass with tee-boxes and greens instead of bases and dugouts. I knew it killed him inside, to see the sport he raised his sons on, and, in turn, come to appreciate, being pushed aside for a skinnier bat and a smaller, now dimpled ball. I quit first, playing high school ball at the time, but my brother was still hanging on by a thread. It didn’t take long for him to hang up his glove, though; maybe a season or two after my departure from the game, and my dad was forced to do the same. Maybe it was the lack of activity in his life after baseball that lead to his passing. That would be the logical excuse, though I believe his losing the game he loved to be around had a hand in it.

That day is hard to forget. It plays over and over again in my memory, inhibiting the ability to achieve happiness. It rings in my ears. That voice echoes as if yelled in a canyon, reverberating through the lobes of the brain, spiraling down the spine, bounding through the body, and extending into the extremities; halting any attempt at picking my feet up from where they were rooted to the ground. It was not as though I hadn’t heard this voice before; in fact, I heard it every day of my life, excluding the not so often trips out of town or occasional stay at a friend’s house, but today was different. There was no soothing or calming tone in my mom’s delivery; no comforting melody with which to relieve the tensions of the day, but in its place a note of worry, of panic. Those two words, followed one after the other in a disarray of harmony, suggested something unsettling on an otherwise beautiful day.

“John,” my mom muttered in an almost scared tone.
The words narrowly escaped my mom’s lips as the garage door slammed shut behind her as it always had in the eleven years I knew that house. I remember waiting for the familiar rattling of the French sliding doors leading to the backyard, a faint chattering muffled by the length of the kitchen. A consequence of not easing the door closed. This had eventually developed into a game, to be played on brighter days than this, between my brother and me, an opportunistic happenstance of my home’s ill fortune where we’d see who could get the closest to letting the door swing shut before catching it at the last moment. However, no amount of skill would seize the door in its swift break toward a violent crash at this instance, and even the characteristic slam of door on doorframe couldn’t dampen the utterance of my dad’s name.

“John,” she had said again only this time with force, a consequence of the worry setting deep in the pit of her stomach. I had never heard my mom yell like that and haven’t since.

The next minutes blurred together as oncoming traffic headlights do on the freeway in the dead of night. I had to take over the emergency call for my brother, who had reduced to hysterics on the kitchen floor. I don’t even recall passing my now collapsed father who lay on the garage floor, unresponsive. Paramedics came as I watched from a distance, but I think my dad’s time had long since passed even before they had arrived, and the ensuing attempt at resuscitation was for our benefit rather than his. They pronounced at the hospital less than an hour later, though I don’t remember being there. The following days were a haze of emotion and blended together as one. Days to weeks, weeks to months, and now months to years. I don’t even remember my dad’s last words to me, possibly something to do with a weekend project he was in the
process of completing or something completely devoid of significant meaning. That’s the problem with memory, it’s fleeting. Though, if there is no primary recollection of the event, I don’t think it’s possible to conjure up any such reminiscence.

Even as I sit in this room, dreaming of a past I cannot possibly hope to remember in its entirety, what remains but fragments of an imagined happiness. The good and the bad have blended together and left something not whole, not worthy of recollection. Maybe that is the realization that is most haunting: Not that I can’t remember my dad but that I don’t feel I should. His memory is pain, an infliction upon my moving forward in life, but most importantly, I am struggling to discern fact from fiction, wherein the man I remember is not a true image and nothing I do will amount to a sufficient remembrance.

My dad’s golf clubs sit in an undeserving shed, one that cannot hope to accommodate items of sentimental value but nonetheless houses. They sit, tucked away in a corner, behind boxes of Halloween and Christmas decorations and containers of old Hot Wheels and Legos – long since played with but, for some reason, kept, maybe in hopes of passing down to future children or the occasional nostalgic return to one’s own childhood. I’ll even admit to periodically building houses or sending a car or two down a track and through a loop but I can’t bring myself to use his clubs. I’ve brought them to the course every so often, wrapped my hands cautiously around the grips and taken a few wary swings but never made contact with the ball, never made an attempt to send that little white ball sailing through the air.

It’s a difficult task. Moving from hole to hole, shot to shot, committing one’s self to every swing and occasionally faltering, shanking a shot wide right, hooking it into the trees, or topping it into the ground, and being forced to immediately forget it and move to
the next attempt. It requires unyielding passion for the game and the memory of a
goldfish. It is a game of inches, that of the space between the ears, involving a mental
capacity unrivaled by any other activity. Golf asks for complete dedication and when it
gets it, gives nothing back. It owes nothing but asks for everything. The same can be
said of life.

That game is fading now, a distant memory of better times and I’m losing it. No
more trips to the range to hit a bucket of torn up golf balls, or a quick round at the end of
the day with my brother. No, the game is fleeting and now, more so than ever, I fear I
may be losing it. I want to say that I’m not struggling with my dad’s passing, that
everything is as it was two years ago and life will go on, but it’s not. I look at those golf
clubs, the only item that still possesses any emotional link to my dad, and am forced to
accept his death. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t missing him and even as I sit in this
cold, unwelcoming room I long for that unrestrained fairway of deep green grass, the
vastness of eucalyptus and pine trees that line the outskirts of the rough, and the
immediate solitude that one steps into when walking onto the first tee. The task isn’t
hitting a shot that would match the beauty of the course or simply walking off the tee.
It’s forgetting that occasional mishit, an unforgiveable slice or uncharacteristic duck-
hook, and stepping up to the ball again, overlooking the intimidating fear of repeating a
bad swing and producing an equally awful result, and just playing.