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# Driving Lessons

FROM TRAVEL AND LEISURE GOLF

*Okay*

MY FATHER TELLS ME to grip the seven-iron "like you're holding a bird in your hands and you don't want to crush it," and I say, "Okay," which is what I always say to my father when I think he is criticizing me, or when I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about, or when I'm filled with a vague and guilty rage toward him, or when all three are happening at once. I say okay when he talks about investment strategies and tax shelters and the enduring value of discipline and why I should buckle down and write a best-seller and when he tells me the story of the ant and the grasshopper, which he started telling me when I was two years old. I'm forty-nine now, and I've been saying okay for forty-seven years.

"You want to sit, not bend," he says after I slice one.

"Okay," I say.

"Both hands working together now," he says. "Belly-button focus."

I hook one.

"Uh-huh. Okay."

"Keep your lower body still."

I swing with savage intent, and miss.

"Okay."

"But not completely still."

Another whiff.

"Oh, I see now. Okay. Yeah. Okay."

We face each other, holding clubs, alone together on a weekday

afternoon at a driving range. It is a brilliant, sunny spring day in St. Louis, home of my father, and of my father's father, and — after he'd immigrated from Hungary — my father's father's father. I have come here from New York City, where I moved to twelve years ago, because my father has agreed to teach me to play golf.

I asked because I wanted to understand his life better, because I wanted to find out what he was doing all those Wednesday afternoons and Saturday mornings and Sunday summer evenings, whether golf was a cause or a symptom of his failed marriage to my mother. I asked because I wanted to learn what my father found in the fairways and on the greens that he didn't find at home, or at work, and whether he was still looking for it.

After he'd agreed, I put off the trip for five years. Because I was busy. Because I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answers to my questions. Because neither my father nor I had ever discovered much joy in our teacher-pupil sessions, whether they involved cutting grass or changing oil or polishing shoes. And then my father had emergency bypass surgery and a subsequent bout of mild depression, and shortly after that his parents got ill and died. I helped write the eulogies that my father delivered. And so, filled with a sense of loss and impending mortality — his and mine — I called to finalize the details of the golf lessons.

There would be three days of lessons, he said, at least a few hours a day and maybe more, culminating in a nine-hole match for which we would be joined by my older brother, who was flying in for business. Okay, I said.

He told me to read *Harvey Penick's Little Red Book.* He told me to buy or borrow a couple of irons and go to the driving range and work on my swing. He told me to practice, especially the short game, "because if you really want to play golf, if you're serious about this, that's what you do, you practice the short game."

What I heard was, "You don't really want to play golf. You're not serious. You're not serious about the short game, not serious about making money, not serious about getting married and having children and not serious about making a success of yourself."

"Okay," I'd said, half a country away. "Okay, okay, okay."

And now, hour four of day one, I'm hooking and slicing and whiffing and topping in St. Louis. If I'd read a solitary page of Penick's book, would I be wiser? If I'd made a single trip to a driv-

ing range in New York, would I be better? If I'd done my homework, would either of us be happier? Does my father sense how I have already failed him?

"We're going to work on the fundamentals this week," my father says. "Stance, grip, putting, the short game, and the basic swing."

"Okay," I hiss, and when I look up, he is frowning, in pain, as if he knows what my okays really mean. I think he does know. I hate when he worries about me. I like it too. I think he has been worrying about me for a long time.

"But most important," he says, "is that we're going to teach you to have fun. That's the most important thing."

He tries so hard. He worries so much. I want to reassure him. I want to make him proud. I want to promise that I will practice the short game and hold my club like an endangered bird, that we will stride down lush fairways together for many years to come.

But I don't, of course. I can't.

"Okay," I say.

*Big Boy*

My father and I are walking in a parking lot, and from time to time I reach out to feel his thigh. I'm nine years old. This is my earliest memory that involves golf. My father tells me that next month he is going on a weekend trip with some of his friends to Illinois to play golf, and he says I'm a big boy now and I can keep a secret and not to tell Mommy, he's going to surprise her. Okay, I say, and I touch his thigh again, which is knotty with muscles. It's a big parking lot. I'm a worried child and I blow saliva bubbles to pass the time and to calm myself, and I am fiercely concentrating on blowing a big one as we walk and I reach out again to touch my father's thigh and then I hear a strange voice and something is wrong and I look up and it's a strange man and then I'm sobbing and here comes my father, laughing, rubbing my head, picking me up in his arms. Somehow I have wandered off, lost in my head, but never out of sight of my father, who has watched his dreamy boy with what? Amusement? Bafflement? Fear for the future? I bury my face in his neck and his hand covers my entire head.

When we get home, I run into the kitchen. "Mommy," I sing,

"Daddy's going to Illinois to play golf with his friends." Betrayal as casual and effortless as sneaking a cookie before dinner. I don't know why I did it.

### *Really Serious*

Our second day at the range, I hit one straight and true.

"That's great!" my father says. "That's really, really great."

It's as if I've announced plans to marry, get a business degree, and move back to the Midwest, all at once.

"Now try it again. Just do the same thing again."

A capital idea, except that I, of course, have no idea what I just did. Consequently, I slice one, then hook two, then whiff, then slice four in a row.

"You're getting it," my father says, with transparent dishonesty. "Let your hands move from eleven o'clock to one o'clock." I've never understood the clock designations for direction. "And swing from the inside out." He might as well be speaking Uzbek.

"Yep, okay," I say.

I'm a good athlete, but I've never been a quick study at sports that require balance. What I possess is a dumb, mulish capacity to absorb pain and humiliation until I master a physical movement. And once I master it, my appetite and skill grow exponentially. I remember the moment on my snowboard when I felt balanced, when a mountain of certain doom morphed into my own snowy playground; the instant that the eighteen discrete mechanical parts of a jump shot merged into one fluid motion; the chilly afternoon when I realized I could rock from one foot to another on my Rollerblades without falling. With golf, though, my straight shot seems to have nothing to do with any choices I have made. It precedes only hours of anguish.

The afternoon drags on, with me screwing up nine of every ten shots and my father offering encouragement that I'm sure is criticism. He mentions every few minutes that people "who are serious" about learning to play golf work on their short games. He says that people who "really want to play golf" practice a lot. If you're "serious" and "really want to play golf," you visualize great shots; you believe in yourself; you learn to play as a kid. He actually says this.

"The great players, the ones who are really serious, who really want to become the best, they learn to play as kids."

What does that make me?

"Okay," I mutter through clenched teeth, slicing and hooking and whiffing. "Okay, okay, okay."

Then I hit another one straight and true. I can't believe it.

"You're a natural, Steve!" my father exclaims. "You're really getting this."

*Ten Minutes*

On the way home from the range, my father suggests we stop for coffee. I think he senses how miserable I am. "How about Starbocks?" he says, which makes me grind my teeth. Does he mispronounce words intentionally? Where did he ever come up with "bocks"? Why am I such a bad son?

We roll onto one of the superhighways that roam the hills and floodplains of suburban St. Louis, the endless swaths of pavement that stretch to the horizon every way you look. I have always possessed a terrible sense of direction, and in the past decade St. Louis has become more confusing than ever to me. I ask how far we will be going.

"Ten minutes," he says, which makes me clench and unclench my fists. Ever since I was a child, prone to car sickness and embarrassing vomiting episodes, I would ask my father how long before we arrived at our destination. I wanted facts, exact times. I longed for the reassurance of certitude. But he offered me the same demonstrably dishonest pabulum. Two blocks, fifty miles, three state lines, it mattered not: "We'll be there in ten minutes."

He had been so looking forward to my visit. His wife — he was recently remarried — is off seeing her children and grandchildren in California. She is a kind woman, acutely aware of how my father yearns to connect with his grown children, and I suspect she arranged the trip for that reason. "So it'll be just you and me," he told me on the phone one evening (after suggesting reading lists and practice regimens). "We'll golf and see some movies and go out to dinner. We'll catch up. We'll have a good time."

And here I am, rocking myself in the passenger seat of his car,

grinding my teeth and clenching my fists, a carsick seven-year-old in a forty-nine-year-old body. A body that isn't serious. A body that doesn't really want to learn his father's game.

### *Advice*

Here are some reasons I never took up golf:

I'm twenty-one, a college senior, and there is a fat brown envelope in the mailbox of the house where I live in California. I share the place with five others, and we cook together and drink beer and listen to the Grateful Dead and play Frisbee and talk about how empty our parents' lives are. I had recently announced to my parents my plan to become a newspaper reporter. In the envelope is an article about the glut of journalists immediately post–Woodward and Bernstein. It is the midseventies, and I'm part of the glut. The article talks about saturation in the field, declining salaries, and shrinking profits at newspapers. At the top, in my father's scrawl, is a short note.

*Maybe you should consider business. At least take some accounting courses.*

I'm almost thirty, have been fired from a newspaper job for my dissolute habits, and am now writing speeches for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. I wear a suit and tie every day and take naps every Saturday afternoon. I suffer from insomnia and chronic stomachaches. When I receive an offer to work on a magazine, I can't recall ever being so happy. I call my father to share my joy.

"You're taking a 30 percent pay cut?" he asks.

"Uh-huh," I say.

"And there's no 401(k) at the magazine?"

"Right," I say.

"And no dental?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"I don't understand," he says. "I don't understand why you're doing this."

I'm forty-five and my father and I are sitting in a café in Colorado. For the past five years, I've been scraping together a life as a freelance writer. A tongue-in-cheek advice book, a collaboration with a professional athlete, some newspaper articles, a fairly steady

string of magazine assignments. I recently finished a dark first-person account of a long winter in the mountains and a near emotional breakdown. It's the most personal thing I've ever written; my favorite story, and I just found out that a small literary magazine will publish it.

"You have a lot of talent," my father says.

"Thanks, Dad," I say. "That means a lot to me."

"No, really, I mean it. You should write a *real* book with all your talent."

"Thanks, Dad," I repeat. One thing we agree on is that my first two efforts weren't *real* books. "Thank you."

"No, really," he repeats. "You should really write a book. A real book. Have you thought about a book? It just seems a waste, with all your talent, not to write a book."

He is trying so hard. Was any father ever more encouraging to a son?

"Well, you know that piece I just sold to the literary magazine, about the winter and all that?"

He nods. I know he read it.

"Well, I'm thinking about expanding that into a book."

He looks at me, confused.

"Who would want to read that?" he says.

*The Launcher*

At our first practice session, I spotted the bulbous oblong poking out of my father's golf bag and asked about it. That is one of his drivers, he said, the Cleveland Launcher, but it would be awhile before it came out of the bag, because people who were serious about golf worked on their short games.

I have always been something of a magpie, attracted to shiny things and quick fixes.

"Okay," I said, then added that I thought I understood the short game. I told him that I had a strong feeling that I could really hit it straight with the Launcher.

"I know a guy who changes clubs like I change underwear," my father told me. "It doesn't help his game any."

Well, sure, I said. Okay. Nevertheless, I told him I thought the

graphite technology might suit my stroke. I have no idea what graphite technology is, but I would have said anything to get my hands on the Launcher.

"It's not the driver," he said. "It's the guy hitting it."

Yeah, I understood. Okay. But what about all *his* gadgets, I said. What about the time we were watching television together and an ad came on for Callaway's first Big Bertha and he called the 800 number and bought one?

"It's not the arrow," my father told me. "It's the Indian."

I have been whining for three days.

"Today," my father tells me on our third day of practice, as we stand at the driving range of Meadowbrook Country Club, "we are going to work on putting and chipping, we'll review your swing and" — dramatic pause — "maybe we'll let you use the Launcher a few times."

I nearly yelp with joy. Because of the Launcher. And because the instruction is almost over. This is the last day of practice before our match tomorrow, and my older brother has flown in from Oregon to join us. Don is two years older, a lawyer and businessman with a wife and child, college funds that have been gaining interest since before his wife was pregnant, and an aggressive-but-not-too-risky retirement strategy. He is as calculating and shrewd in his approach to golf as he is to life. Don, it should probably go without saying, has an excellent short game.

Don takes a wedge and two irons and starts hitting.

Before I can swing the Launcher, my father wants to try something new with me today. He wants to introduce me to his Inside Out machine. It is another of the gadgets he buys, in direct violation of his arrow/Indian philosophy. Then again, he has always been a man of contradictions. He tells me to keep my feet still, to do the bird grip, to focus on my navel, then he adds, "But when you get up to hit the ball, trust your body. Don't think of anything." He stresses the supremacy of man over tools but later says, "If you're really serious about golf, you'll get fitted clubs." He stresses that lessons help any golfer, even the professional, that any golfer who "really wants to play" should be open to learning. Does he take lessons? "No, because it always screws up my game for weeks afterward."

So I shouldn't be surprised when Mr. It's Not the Arrow now

places a thing that looks like a cross between an automatic sprinkler and a mechanical shoe-shine machine in front of me, sticks a ball underneath it, and tells me to swing.

"Inside out," he says.

Would it do either of us any good if I asked what in the world he was talking about?

I slice the ball.

"Try again," he says.

And I do. And I slice again. I try seven times and slice seven times.

"The ad says that on the seventh swing you'll be going straight and long," my father says. "Here, let me try."

While he works with the Inside Out, I slip the Launcher from the bag and smack one. I adore the heft, the soft little ping, the distance. I smack another. Meanwhile, Don experiments with irons and wedges, asks for exact distances to various flags, makes inquiries about how fast the greens are. And there we stand, a man and his two grown boys. My father mutters and curses at the Inside Out until, like magic, on the seventh try, he hits a towering drive 260 yards, and then another and another. Don squints, adjusts his grip, chips, drives, toys with his swing, chips some more, asks people driving by in golf carts about the greens. I whale away with the Launcher, spraying balls everywhere, with lots of energy and very little direction.

### *Keeping Score*

Day four: on the first tee the Launcher fails me, and I whiff. Maybe I fail myself. It's different here on the course. There are trees to worry about, and middle-aged women waiting to play behind us, and a scorecard, and my shirt keeps coming out of my shorts, which, my father tells me, is a violation of Meadowbrook Country Club policy. I try again and dribble one about ten feet and he tells me to remember about my grip, and to swing from the inside out, and to relax, to have fun, to let my body take over. I whiff again. Finally, I ground one about eighty feet.

"That's all right," my father says. "You're on the fairway. You're in good position."

"No matter how bad you are," my pragmatic older brother tells me, "if you're fast, no one will refuse to play with you."

I sprint after my ball.

It goes this way for three holes, my father and brother playing slightly above par, me hacking and whiffing and slicing and sprinting.

On the fourth hole, I find myself three feet from a water hazard, then dribble three balls into the water. My father reaches into his bag for his folding, snap-jawed mechanical ball retriever to snatch the balls from the pond. "Best investment I ever made," he says.

Once, Don, eyeing the green, asks whether it's 135 or 140 yards away. I tell him that even good players are a pain in the ass when they're so sluggish, and does he have to be so calculating about everything, can't he just hurry up and smack the ball? He tells me to shut up.

Once, I seven putt. Once, I lose a ball in the woods. My father offers advice for awhile but eventually sees how it's adding to my misery.

On the seventh hole, he pulls me aside.

"You know, the score doesn't matter," he says. "This is just your first time. The thing that would make me happy is if you get to like this enough that when you go back to New York you decide to go out and play by yourself."

## *A Golf Story*

In the last years of my paternal grandparents' lives, they told me a story about my father. It's a golf story. It doesn't start out that way, but trust me.

My father is four years old and his baby brother, a two-year-old whom everyone calls Sonny, is sleeping in his stroller one morning when he stops breathing. That afternoon, his mother makes my father noodles and milk — his favorite — and she cries, but she doesn't say anything about why Sonny is gone, or where he is, or if he'll ever come back.

She cries for the next two years, and she doesn't mention Sonny for almost seventy years after that. But my father doesn't cry.

He is sixteen years old, a high school student, a letterman, a star

in football and basketball and track. He works hard. He practices. He wants to be a doctor. He is serious and really wants to do well.

He is eighteen years old, a college freshman at the University of Michigan, and it is winter break and his parents are driving him to Union Station in St. Louis, where he will board a train to return for his second semester, but he has a stomachache, he feels sick. "Let's take him home, Herman," his mother, my grandmother, says, and they do, so he can sleep and get over his stomach flu.

The next day they drive him back to the train station. But he feels sick again, so they return home. On the third day, in the car on the way to Union Station, my father feels sick once more, and his mother tells him he doesn't have to go to Michigan, he can stay home and go to school at Washington University. So he does. He goes to school in St. Louis, and he gets married to his high school sweetheart and has two sons and thinks he's too old to go to medical school. He needs to support his family, so he works as a manager in the same drugstore chain as his father.

He is twenty-six, and he needs more money to support his family. He tells the president of the company that if he doesn't get a raise, he will have to look for work elsewhere. The president wishes him well.

He answers a blind ad in the newspaper, an ad that calls for "smart, hardworking young men." He has a wife and two boys — the youngest of whom tends to get lost and blow bubbles when he's daydreaming and throws up in the car — and a mortgage, and now he is a life insurance salesman. He makes cold calls. Sometimes he doesn't come home until nine or ten o'clock at night. At breakfast, he pores over thick booklets so he can take the test that will allow him to become a Chartered Life Underwriter. He has pens and calendars made with his name on them.

He is thirty-five years old, and now there's a third child — a little girl — and sometimes he clenches his jaw when he's getting ready to go to work in the morning, and one night when his sons can't sleep they hear him in the kitchen cussing to their mother about the people in the head office. Sunday nights he takes his children to Steak 'n' Shake for hamburgers, "to give your mom a break," and on the evenings when it's the second son's turn to ride in the front seat there is a serious speech about enjoying oneself, how it's important to relax, that there's no need to hurry into marriage,

that "you have the rest of your life to be responsible." The boy is eleven years old.

At night, the boy's father goes to sleep before anyone else in the house, because he's so tired. On Saturday mornings, though, he wakes whistling, beaming. On Saturday mornings he plays golf. He comes home in the early evening smelling of grass and grinning. He has his Saturdays, and sometimes Wednesday afternoons, and the occasional summer Sunday evening, and his annual trip to Illinois with his friends.

He returns from those trips expansive, talking about "honor" and how in golf "there's no referees, you have to trust yourself and the people you're playing with," and how "I've never met a man who cheats on the golf course who I like in life," and how "if a man plays square, you can trust him with anything." A few times he brings home a first-place trophy. "Bigger than the one in the U.S. Open," he says, laughing.

He is sixty-one, divorced and remarried for ten years. He is more relaxed now, less worried, less tired. He plays golf a lot, sometimes with his new wife. His children have never seen him so happy. When she is diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer, she insists that he keep playing golf, and he does, until her last two months, when he stays at home with her, feeding her and taking care of her in the bedroom, which she doesn't leave. When she dies, he grieves, of course, and he has some fainting spells. And then he thinks of Sonny — he hasn't thought of Sonny in decades — and for the first time he cries for his little brother and he can't stop.

Ten years pass, and he has chest pains and emergency bypass surgery and a bout with depression and a few girlfriends who don't work out. And then he meets someone who doesn't golf but says that if it's important to him, she'll learn.

And now he is seventy-four, married for the third time. He tells his children he loves them often, spoils his thirteen grandchildren and step-grandchildren with bicycles and computer games and toy trucks and trips to the zoo and sleepovers and ice cream sundaes in the middle of the day. Not one of them knows what a step-grandchild is. The word would mystify them. He is a lifetime member of the Million Dollar Round Table, which, in the life insurance business, is as good as it gets. He is one of the most successful salesmen

in the country, an innovator who sold the first group tax-sheltered annuity in the world.

(I know what a group tax-sheltered annuity is now. I know that it has earned his company many billions of dollars.

"Your company should name a building after you," I say one afternoon, between a slice and a hook.

"They don't even know my name," he replies.)

He paid for his three children's college education, offered them choices and career opportunities he might have dreamed about but could never pursue. He skis, owns property in a resort town, winters in Palm Springs, works when he wants, travels when he wants. All of that came to him because he was serious, because he really wanted it. Hard work and thrift and seriousness of purpose have formed the bulwark for him against pain and loss, but they haven't been enough. Still, what else is there?

Isn't it obvious?

There are Saturdays and Wednesdays and summer Sunday evenings and a place where he can breathe fresh air and stretch and play, where honor means something and where people don't cheat.

I want to tell him how proud I am of him, how I wish I could live up to the example he set, how I envy him his discipline and success and self-sacrifice and generosity. I want to tell him how much he means to me. But I can't. So I vow to do the next best thing. I will hit a good shot in our match. If I need to be serious, I will be serious. If I need to really want it, I will really want it. Whatever it takes, I will do it.

Anything, to hit a good shot.

*You Never Know*

I don't, of course. I don't hit a good shot. If it were that easy, if striking the ball cleanly and with strength and purpose and something approaching artistry were as simple as just distilling all the resentment and misunderstanding and rage and wounded feelings and guilt and gratitude and love a son holds toward his father into a smooth and honest and powerful swing, there would be legions of scratch golfers launching millions of elegant drives all over the

world. There would be so many multitudes of white dimpled balls arcing across empty skies that no one would be able to see the sun.

But it's not that easy. So I whiff and hack and sprint and goad my brother, who plays with grim cunning. I kid my father about the ball retriever and ask him to tell me stories of the trips to Illinois, and I beg for tales from his early days in the insurance business and of his best shots and his favorite afternoons on the golf course.

I give up, and I relax, and I cheer on my father, and if you're a golfer, or a father, or a son, of course you know what happens next.

I can still see it leaving the Launcher, flying away, a blur of white against the deep green of the trees, the baby blue of the midwestern afternoon. A white smudge, low to the ground, a vector bending toward the distant green.

A mystery.

"Great shot!" my father yells. He applauds. "That's a great shot!" he yells again, and applauds some more.

"I don't know how I did it," I say as he comes over to pat me on the back.

It doesn't matter, he tells me. What's important is that I did it, and that I'm having fun. I may not play golf when I return to New York City. I'm not sure if I'll go to the driving range with friends. I don't know if I'll ever pick up a club again.

It doesn't matter. It truly doesn't matter.

We walk together, up the fairway, my father and I, playing golf. He will shoot a 42 for the nine holes. I will finish at 86.

We are blessed.

"That's the great thing about this game," he tells me, his arm around my shoulder. It is a mild, sunny day, and the grass is soft and springy and the Emerald City of the final hole beckons. This is the lush fairway I imagined. "Even if you have a bunch of bad shots," my father says, "you never know when you're going to hit a good one. And that good one can save you."