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## THE LIFE OF REILLY

By Rick Reilly

Since this is my first column for *The Magazine*, I figure I should introduce myself. And maybe the best way to tell you who I am is to tell you about my dad, Jack. He was an Irish tenor, a yarn spinner, a songwriter, a father of four, a crack golfer and a first-class drunk.

As kids, we blamed golf. We thought the game made him meaner than a dyspeptic rattler. We were sure it was more important than we were, or why was he never around? More than once he asked me, "What grade are you in again?"

He'd always come home drunk after playing golf, except for the times he'd come home dripping drunk. Then he'd be looking to bust something, maybe a lamp, maybe somebody's nose; my mom's, once. To this day, the sound of spikes on cement sends a shot of ice through me. That was him coming up the sidewalk.

In alcoholic families, the youngest kid becomes the mascot. That was me. I became the funny one, comic relief, third-grade vaudeville—anything to keep the furniture where it was. When he'd eventually stagger into bed, the rat in my stomach would finally stop gnawing.

When I was about 10 or 11, I started working through the thing backward. If I could play golf with him, maybe I could keep him from drinking. I'd be the hero! So I started asking him to take me. He did once, but my fear of him was so paralyzing that any instruction he gave sounded like a shotgun blast in my ear. After about three holes, I stormed off the course in tears and waited in the car. HE WAS 70, I WAS 30. WE



## FINALLY MET.

I didn't play again until high school. I did it partly to understand what was so wonderful about a game that would keep a man from coming to his kids' games and piano recitals and birthday parties.

And I was happy to find out it wasn't the Titleist clubs that made him so mean, it was the Canadian Clubs. It was the whiskey. Golf was this green-and-blue launching pad for little white rockets. Golf taught me the lessons my dad never did, including the best one: You play life where it lies. You hit it there. You play it from there. Nobody threw you a nasty curve or forgot to block the defensive end. I learned that my mistakes were mine alone, not my boss', not the cop's and, as much as I hated to admit it, not my dad's.

And then one day, out of the blue, maybe 25 years ago, my dad went to one AA meeting and quit drinking. Never had a drop after that.

It was five more years before I finally believed it. Then I invited him to the Masters. He was 70, I was 30. And it was on that two-and-a-half-hour ride from Atlanta to Augusta that we finally met.

He told me his life story, how he drank and fought to get the attention of his distant father, how he'd kept from us that he'd been married before, and how sorry he was to have let his family grow up while he was holding down the 19th hole with his elbows.

He apologized and cried. I forgave him and cried. I never dreamed I-20 could be that emotional.

Suddenly he understood. He went home to Boulder, Colo., and apologized to my mom and my brother and two sisters. They finally got to tell him how much he hurt them. He wrote us a poem about his love for us and his shame and why nobody would cry the day he died.

It took a lot of guts and a lot of courage, and the only lousy part was that it came so late. By the time I saw him for who he was—a strong man who took most of a lifetime to understand his crushing weakness—I was ears deep into my own family and career. So we didn't play much golf together before the warranty on his heart started to expire. I never got to really see the swing that won all those trophies. By then, the only time he used his putter was as a cane.

Two months ago, on the final night of his life, I sat alone in a chair next to his hospice bed, holding his hand and a box of Kleenex and proving how wrong poems can be sometimes.

As I looked at him, I realized that for better and worse, he'd shaped me. I think I'm a good father borne of his rotten example. I'm a storyteller out of surviving him. I'm a man with more flaws than a 1986 Yugo, but I try to own up to them, because a very good Irish tenor showed me how.

And that's what I call a very good save.

*To access Rick Reilly's Mailbag, [go here.](#)*

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