

of golfing, and living, and letting go

Penny Kittle

I'm standing on the eighth tee with a 37: the best round of my life. Two holes left and even if I bogey them both I'll break 50. My dad stands in the shade, smiling, "Keep your head down," he reminds me.

Oregon summer: it's cool in the shade, and you reach for your jacket, but so warm beneath the blue sky that you lean your head back, feel the heat travel down your scalp and then your spine. I steady my hands on the grip, crossing one thumb over the other like my dad taught me. I glance at the pin down the slope and a little to the right--281 yards away. I rock slightly over the ball, align my shoulders, feel my left elbow against my waist. "Keep your head down, I'll watch it," Dad says again, a gentle push that means *c'mon and swing it already*.

I relax my shoulders and ease through the shot with a full thwack. We watch it arc across the brilliance of spring green as my dad whistles and says, "What a shot! What a beauty!" It lands below the green, an easy chip on. "A shot like that, Pooh, and you'll beat your old man."

Before I say 'you're not old' I feel its truth. It's still good out here on the course, but these rare Sunday afternoons when I visit from the east are quickly by us again. We play a couple rounds a year. Don't do the math, I tell myself, there won't be enough of them left.

Anything can happen. I know this; so do you. I had a dream last week that I still can't shake. I was driving on a beautiful road mid-summer, my left arm resting lazily out the open window. I couldn't see beyond the rise in the road ahead. I thought to myself, We're all on a road that leads to the cemetery; we just don't know if it's coming up next turn on the right, or if it is thousands of miles and dozens of years before us. I heard that truth with such certainty and peace in my dream that I kept driving, drifting along with the ride; but I awoke breathing hard.

I look back at my dad as he stands over the ball, gripping his club with both hands, a fierce stance, a pause before he uncoils in a just-slightly-controlled blast through the ball. Someday I'll be here without him, I think, and fear claws its way from gut to heart. Just slow this down, please.

Stop here.

Before I chip my ball beyond the green to the other side, then stub the next shot against long grass and curse.

Before I unravel on the ninth hole where I put my tee shot off the toe of my club and my second on the cart path, where it rolls downhill. Before I chip and putt my way past 50 to another ordinary, frustrating round.

Before the years begin to unravel towards a cruel end: before the emphysema and coughing, wheezing, rasping towards air. Before the oxygen leash that keeps him trapped at home pacing one room to the next.

Before he shaves 35 pounds off his boyish frame and can no longer sleep reclined, but sits shivering on the couch beneath blankets.

Before his eyes empty of light and mirth.

Before surgery and cancer and letting him go.

Before my son and I return to this place, this exact place, on the day after he lies beneath a sheet, cold and still at the funeral home--

Stop here.

Stay with the drive as it leaves the tee and rises against a backdrop of ancient fir trees. Feel the breeze move the hairs on your arm, the fine sweat beneath sunglasses, see your father standing beside you, telling you you can do this, just relax.

He'll watch the ball.

He'll keep score.

He'll buy you a soda after and introduce you to whoever comes by, "This is *my* daughter," he'll say.

Life is lived right here in this moment. Pay attention. Pull the car over walk. You'll still get there, but the view across fields to the ocean is better seen one step at a time. Perhaps you've got a notebook, a pencil--you see a spot up ahead beneath an old oak. Rest awhile here.

Write.

Write this life and share.