

DeWitt Henry  
ON GOLF

Golf was as central to my childhood's family in the 1950's as swimming, writing, drawing and painting, or the candy factory that my grandfather had started and that my father now ran.

There were always golf clubs, golf bags, golf balls, putters, wiffle golf balls, rubber targets for putting on rugs, golf shoes with cleats, fingerless golf gloves, and green sun visors around our house, mostly in the downstairs closet (a huge closet, where umbrellas, overcoats, dad's felt hats, and mom's special silver fox stole and its fox-head clasp hung). There were also trophies from past tournaments, a crystal dish for cigarettes with a silver lid; three or four crystal ashtrays with silver rims; a silver cup with winged handles; a golden figurine of a golfer on a wooden base, with a little plaque. Mom, Chuck (my second oldest brother), and Dad would practice their swings outside. Dad and Chuck would practice chip shots in the side yard, careful not to make divots.

Jack (my oldest brother) and Judy (my sister, older than me, younger than Chuck) never played. Jack was absorbed by his cars and by hunting, Judy by swimming and reading. Chuck had been Junior Club Champion, and several of the ashtrays were his. He had his own set of clubs, his own golf shoes.

My mother's financier father, Jerome Thralls, had played on Long Island, and when my mother was a teenager she had walked the course with him. The St. Davids Golf Club, where we had our family membership, had once been the pasture of my great grandfather Henry's dairy farm. In fact the very house in which my father had been born stood behind the tenth hole green. When my great grandfather had died, the farm had been sold by my grandfather, so that they could buy the Bloomingdale Avenue house in Wayne, and he could continue to build his candy business in Philadelphia.

In our home movies, a younger, leaner Dad practices swings at Bloomingdale, before and after I was born. He had started playing in Boston, when he worked for the Walter Baker Company. They had moved back home from Boston after my grandfather's heart attack, and been given the family house, while my grandparents moved first to a farm in Malvern, and then to their retirement house in Ithan. His swings were always a strange chopping scoop at the ball, and then he would fall away because of his bad leg.

Mom (I was told by Mom) used to be really good. Some of the trophies were hers. She had her bag, her golf shoes, and her good set of ladies' clubs. But shortly before we moved from Bloomingdale to St. Davids, during Dad's "bad time," she and her clubs went alone on a golfing vacation to Bermuda, where she says she played until there was nothing else. But then after we moved she had bursa problems--calcium deposits, in her shoulder, arm--and after operations on them was left so weakened that she doubted if she could ever play again. Her swing had stiffened. She began to take lessons. She played with a ladies' foursome on ladies' day.

Our family club membership included a monthly dining room charge

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whether we ate there or not. So periodically, on Sundays, Dad would “take us out to eat,” and after my grandfather’s death, would sometimes bring Nana Henry as well. Except for Mom, we all hated this; hated the dressing up, and the stiff formality. Dad would call the middle-aged waiter by name, Tony, and Tony would welcome him personally as Mr. Henry, and Mom, Mrs. Henry, and smile at us admiringly, the Henrys. In summers, our table would be on a porch with open screened windows that overlooked the putting green and vistas of the fifth, eighth and ninth fairways. As we ordered, I watched distant players with envy, wishing I could be out there (in shorts, tee shirt and golf shoes, carrying my bag), instead of here (in my suit with scratchy pants, my shirt with starched collar, my white buck shoes). When Mom ordered, she always said “the”: “I’ll have the lamb.” Chuck and Jack would go for steak; Dad, Judy and I for roast beef “au jus,” pink in the center and crisp brown at the borders. Dinners at the club were one of our few public appearances as a family (another was Christmas Eve or Easter services at The Wayne Presbyterian Church). Dad and Mom would greet other members with a smile or nod, or sometimes people came over to say hello, and we would all be introduced.

One branch of the club’s activities involved junior members, the teen-aged children of adult members, for whom tournaments and lessons, as well as social activities were arranged.

Chuck had been Junior Champion, renowned for his long drives and iron shots. I remember one of our first family foursomes--or maybe it was only an early occasion when I walked around with the three of them, or caddied for my mother—and our marveling at the distance and accuracy of Chuck’s shots. The fact that he could possibly reach the greens of the long par fours in two shots seemed to me a kind of magic, inimitable. His ball would lift clean and high in the air, and keep going, beyond what any of us could expect or believe.

When I turned thirteen, I began to go to the junior clinics and to play in their nine-hole tournaments, which were held on Sunday afternoons. Both Mom and Dad had taken regular lessons from Tommy, the club pro. Now in the junior clinics, Tommy checked my grip. He said I had a natural swing. Keep my eye on the ball, head fixed. Slow back swing, along the line of flight, then swivel hips, head down, and follow through.

At first, I played with hand-me-down clubs. Some had been grand-pop Thralls’s, some Mom’s (Dad had bought her a new set), or Dad’s or Chuck’s. I wore dad’s castaway shoes. Later, as I got more serious, I saved up money from odd jobs to buy new Spaulding Irons, one by one; and as Dad’s old woods decayed, a Ben Hogan driver. I won the drawing for a new bag at a candy manufacturers’ convention we attended with Dad.

The golf club was a realm unto itself, apart from my public high school world (in fact, most club juniors went to private school). Where football or basketball might lead to popularity at school, golf was strictly a personal, or a family thing.

Only three or four of families from my public school belonged to St. Davids, including the Kings, and Dave King was my only classmate to play golf. Taller than I was, “Kingy” was starting center on our basketball

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team (where I didn't make the team), starting right end in football (where I was third string center), and a mainstay in track for hurdles and the 440 (where I filled in for field events). At school he was friendly, though never a friend. At the club, aside from a chance practice round, we never played together. He established himself as Junior Champion, and usually played with Tommy (the pro), Bobby Lenniger (the former Junior Champion after Chuck), or adult members with low handicaps. He even went on to hold the Club Championship for several years in a row, starting in 11th grade. At the club he was a personage, but golf meant nothing to his friends at school.

Another classmate, Dick Curley, showed up to caddy, and that troubled me—here he was Sally Yerkes's boyfriend, a hearty, well-liked starter, like King, in all the sports. I knew that his family was poor, but I didn't want him to see me here as a member's son. I didn't want him caddying for my family, watching and knowing us that way.

Once I'd begun to break 50 for nine holes, playing with my fellow juniors, Chuck agreed to take me out to play full rounds, becoming both my mentor and my rival. He came and went during these years, first dropping out of Cornell, then starting at Franklin and Marshall, then drafted and serving in Korea, then home again and in medical school at Hahnemann.

For several summers, I became a club rat. Before I got my license, Mom or Chuck would drop me off, and pick me up later. The shag bag and balls were in Dad's locker, which Richard, the aging black attendant, would open for me. As I changed into golf shoes, Richard would take my street loafers without asking and shine them, then return them to the locker. Rarely, but sometimes, other adult members would be changing. They would greet me as Dad's son.

Unless adults were practicing or having a lesson, I would hit practice nine irons to the practice green. I would sometime pay a caddy \$10 to shag practice drives and long irons from the shade of a tree beside the first tee, out over the 18th and 17th fairways. Members golfing hated this, of course, since as they played, their own ball might be hard to find among the practice balls. But I would practice, practice, priding myself on my long ball, which was straight most of the time, but otherwise sent my caddy running. I spent hours as well on the putting green, making way for Mr. Young, who was 94, dapper, and who drove a 30 year old black sedan at no more than 15mph, and spent his entire day putting.

Gradually, my game improved. I could make some pars and even some birds, along with all the bogies and double bogies. I played full rounds regularly with two other Juniors, who were younger than me, and neither as good; and some days, even two rounds. I played in tournaments, never placing at the top, but sometimes coming close. But all that was put to the test in our family threesomes and foursomes.

Dad's own game was stable. He played every week with his Saturday foursome, as he had been for years. Overweight, and with his bad leg, he would put in his five-day executive week; then disappear early Saturday morning in slacks, loafers, and a polo shirt. He'd return in mid-afternoon, then fall into a deep sleep on our living room couch.

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If for any reason, he missed a Saturday playing with his foursome, he would propose we play as a family on Sunday, when the course was less busy.

We'd arrive, all pomp and circumstance. Chuck and I would have our golf shoes with us and change in the car; then we'd take our clubs from the trunk and carry them in through the men's locker room, our cleats clicking, and up the rubberized ramp into and through the pro shop, out to the crowded first tee. Mom would change in her locker room and Dad in his; then Dad would stop in the pro shop. Irv the caddy master would give him a special greeting (Irv had a withered left arm, and when Chuck or I were there alone, he would tell us how grateful he was to Dad for getting him his job, presumably when Dad served on the club's board of trustees). Mom would get the scorecard and little pencils. Dad would ask for his favorite caddy, who could carry double. Irv would pull down their bags from a storage rack in back, and the caddy would bring them around to the tee, where Chuck's and my bags were lined up. We'd all take practice swings with our drivers as groups ahead of us teed off. Then Paul, the florid-faced Irish starter, would call out: "Henrys!"

In front of Paul, the caddies, and the players waiting to go after us, each of us steps up in turn. Dad would thwap the ground with his practice swing, wipe his right hand on his leg, get set, then scoop-swing with a grunt and fall away, sending his drive in the fairway some 200 yards. Mom, next, ten yards forward on the ladies' tee: her back swing twisting high, then swivel and down, topping the ball, so it bounced short of the fairway to the left, at which point she would shake her head and wave off Dad's offer of a mulligan. Chuck would tee up (and behind us, Paul would whisper: "Watch this guy, he's really good!"), take practice swings that clipped the ground with a swish, then square off at the ball, waggle, then all in one smooth motion hit and follow-through, as his ball carried high down the middle and over the crest. I would go last (Paul's whisper: "Kid hits long, but he's wild"), work my feet into the ground, inhale, exhale, check the fairway, eyes down, concentrate on the ball, start the club head slowly back, pivot, then swinging down hard, hit and follow through, clean, the club and shaft up and behind my neck, and only then looking up too see my drive straight and low, the equal of Chuck's, or, more likely, a big slice into trees to the right, nearly out of bounds.

Chuck and I would shoulder our bags. The caddy would stop at Mom's ball with Mom, and after she hit a wood into the fairway, and then another, head for Dad's. If I were in the trees, I would hit out fat and end up way short of the green, or maybe in a sand trap. Dad's four iron would land short of the green. Chuck's drive would be perhaps 80 yards from the hole—a high nine iron with back spin that rolled back, leaving a twenty foot putt, which he would miss by five feet, but still make par.

Our games rehearsed our lives. Dad played a game smugly confident in mediocrity. Mom played lamenting the game she used to have. Chuck played well. And I played frustrated and anxious about the game I knew I should have, and did, I thought, on any occasion but this, when I had to prove myself in the eyes of my family.

I took my every flubbed shot as a self-betrayal, or as an injustice at the hands of fate; every three-putt green; every out of bounds; every choice

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of too much or too little club. Dad was skeptical, always: "You'll never make that shot." When I did make a clean, pure shot; or when I sank a long putt, he dismissed it as luck, rather than as skill. Mom, meanwhile, over-praised my good shots, bewailed the misses; and never lost her faith in my potential or deserts. As for Chuck, the more miserable I grew, the more he kept aloof. This was only a game. You didn't throw clubs. You didn't break the rules. You didn't spoil it for everyone else. Which isn't to say he didn't get mad at himself, also. The challenge of golf was partly a challenge of temper. By the finishing holes, we would all be playing in an ugly, malevolent silence. Dad would finish in the nineties. Mom would never break one hundred. Chuck would break eighty and I might break ninety, where my personal best, apart from my family, was a 78. Nevertheless, we always looked forward to these games as a family rite.

We also loved the course itself: the manicured five-mile trek of it, the close-cut Bermuda grass of the putting surfaces, the browned, coarser grass of the fairways (cross-hatched from mowing), and the full, thick rough. The whirl of cicadas. The lush vistas. The old leafy trees: willows, elms, oaks, and maples. The hills, especially on 13, with the green elevated higher than a house; then from the high tee on 14, the dog leg left over water and bordered by woods out of bounds (often my nemesis, no matter how well I played). The clear, hot pressure of the sun and its dazzle on grass and sand, the watery mirages on humid days. We came to know each hole with its tricks and hazards. I can visualize the course even now, hole by hole, a lifetime later.

Speaking of luck: given Dad's years of regular play, the odds for an occasional miracle were in his favor. At some point, playing with his four-some, he scored an eagle 2 on the long fifth hole, when his three wood from the fairway trickled onto the green and into the cup. Some years later, towards the end of his life, he made a hole-in-one on 6, thereby joining the club's Hole-in-One Club, which meant he had to stand drinks to the entire lounge, and got an honorary plaque.

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Dad kept playing until he died at age 72 (complications from a liver operation). He and Mom had moved to a single-floor, ranch style "retirement" house in Villanova, with a large enough back yard for us to still practice chip shots when we visited. As for putting, now we had a long carpeted hallway as well as a spacious living room. I kept a bedroom here as I came back and forth from Massachusetts, first from college, and then from graduate school. Jack and Judy had settled at great distances, Colorado and Virginia. Chuck married a nurse my age during his four-year residency at nearby Bryn Mawr Hospital; had two boys, and then moved to Winona, New Jersey, to practice as a surgeon at Woodbury Memorial Hospital. When I visited Mom and Dad, we made a new ritual of driving on the freeways over the Walt Whitman bridge to visit him. Before long his third son was born and they moved into a big Victorian in Woodbury. Golf, with its patrician ceremonies, remained central in his life. He joined a country club there and would go on golfing junkets with doctor friends to Myrtle Beach and elsewhere. He kept his game up and would boast that he could go professional, if he wanted to; all he needed was time to practice, and the pressure of playing for money.

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After my freshman spring at Amherst, when I played poorly with the golf team, golf went out of my life. On visits home, sometimes Chuck would visit and we'd either play together at St. Davids, or make a threesome with Dad, with Chuck and me now signed in as guests. I kept my bag, shoes, and clubs with me in my car trunk, but my life was away from home. Writing was my passion. I went from Amherst to years at Harvard in graduate English. I lived at the poverty line, on scholarships, grants, subsidies from Dad, and my first part-time teaching. On another visit home, before Chuck's sons were old enough to play, he took me as a guest to play his own course. We had this bond.

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It is the spring of 1976, in Cambridge. Tim O'Brien, a writer friend, who has published two books, and is about to publish a third, and whom I've come to know in connection with the literary magazine I have co-founded, professes a passion for golf, and has his clubs. I tell him that I haven't played for years, but that I used to have a 9 handicap. I keep my clubs with me in the trunk of my car. He invites me to join him and another friend, Sandy, on an expedition to a top-rated public course outside of Boston, Shaker Hills.

Tim is from Minnesota, and from a background similar to mine, but different in being two years younger than I am and having chosen to serve in Viet Nam, while I buried myself in graduate school for draft deferments. Sandy is a fellow Viet Nam vet and Michael Dukakis's campaign manager. Tim and I are both recently married, but as they pick me up and put my moldy clubs in their car—a convertible, top down—their boisterous talk en route is all about womanizing.

We park and sign in for \$20 each. We practice on the putting green, and then I pull out my driver and take big practice swings as we wait, feeling confident despite my years away. The first tee is elevated, with marshy rough below to the left and pines to the right. Both Tim and his friend hit modest drives into the fairway. They step aside and wait for me. My first try, I lift my head as I hit, topping the ball, so it dribbles irretrievably into the marsh. They grant me a mulligan. I settle down, another big swing, and this time the ball pops high and makes it 50 yards or so, just onto the lip of the fairway. We take our bags and set off, stopping at my ball. I take out a three wood. Practice swing. Aim to the left edge of the fairway, where it bends out of sight. Big swing—and this time not only the ball, but the head of my club flies into the marsh, the club head carrying farther than the ball. I make my red-faced apologies, take the penalty and drop. I hit a decent iron to the bend in the fairway. Including my approach shots, and a four-putt green, my score is 10. Tim has made par 4, his friend a 5. They confer together and agree that they can't take my money. Of course, I had no idea that we are playing for \$25 per hole. They decide to go on gambling together, and seeing how pathetic I am, allow me to play along for practice. I'm rusty. It's been a long time. And so it goes. I hit a good shot now and then, a good drive at last, proof of my old game, which is otherwise in ruins. But I am mortified. I am painful to behold, chopping and hacking my way, sometimes even missing the ball. Tim wins over Sandy, one or two holes up. I can imagine their laughter after they drop me off and go for a drink. This is the end of golf for me, I

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tell Connie back home. I'm humiliated enough by rejections of my novel. I don't need to pay to be humiliated by golf as well. Here too, I realize, I have transferred my rivalry with Chuck, in golf and in life, to Tim, who progresses not only as a professional writer, but who plays in a regular writers' foursome with John Updike.

This same fall, Dad dies unexpectedly.

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Golf remained central to Chuck's life, along with his surgical practice (and its side benefit of wealth), his family, and his friendships,. He tried to initiate each of his three sons over time. Sometime after Dad's death, Connie and our daughter Ruth visited my mother, who now lived alone in the Villanova house, and who had built an enclosed swimming pool that took up the back yard, leaving no more room for our chip shots. Chuck proposed to drive up and join us, and despite my protests that I had lost my game cajoled me into one last round at St. Davids. He brought along his oldest son, 17 year old Chuck Jr. He paid the green fees himself, as if he were Dad. Since we were no longer members, Irv let us play as his special guests. Against the timelessness of the course itself, our family rite would pass to a new generation. Chuck Jr., however, showed no aptitude, my own heart had gone out of the game, and even Chuck Sr.'s playing seemed off. The effort felt forced.

I would learn later of the tensions in Chuck's parenting. That his marriage had broken up and was headed for divorce. That his boys formed a kind of outlaw band among themselves, and were in and out of trouble with the police; all had drug and alcohol problems; and Chuck Jr. needed therapy for the crippling pressure he felt to live up to Chuck. None would finish college.

Soon after his divorce in 1985, our mother died. He served as her executor, overseeing the sale of her house and distribution of inheritance (in our case, allowing us to buy a starter house just in time for the arrival of our adopted son, David, from Korea). Chuck himself moved into a condo, which I visited in 1988, when I attended a teachers' convention in Philadelphia. A new golf bag and set of clubs stood in its vestibule. He continued to operate on cancers. He was dating different women, but soon found a new steady girl friend, "the love of his life," Maureen. A divorcee with means, she had her own condo and refused to live with or marry him. Spurious malpractice suits and the high cost of malpractice insurance forced Chuck to retire early, at age 58: embittered and resigned, but determined to enjoy himself. Over the next eight years, he and Maureen traveled abroad; they traveled out West to visit Jack, then Judy, with side visits to his sons in Arizona. In 1995, they went to Kenya, where he performed volunteer surgery, some 300 operations, and where they played golf. They visited us. They bought a time-share condo in Los Cobos, Mexico, across from a golf course, and invited us to visit, though we never could or really wanted to. Alone in his New Jersey condo, Chuck often called me long distance, sounding depressed, especially after one of his long-time golfing buddies died. He spoke of feeling deserted by his sons, who only got in touch when they needed money. A surprise call, this time from Maureen in 1999, brought Connie and me to Woodberry Memorial Hospital and Chuck's bedside a week before his 66th birthday. He was dying of lung

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cancer, which he had known about over the past year without telling me or anyone else. Maureen was now his wife. They'd been married in a bedside service, cake and all, before she called. She'd called his sons as well, and they now hovered close, bewildered in sudden reunion and anxious about his will. Doctor friends stopped by. We struggled to be sociable. In the midst all these claims, despite his maximum of morphine, Chuck sat up and smiled wryly through his pain: "I have more cancer than I have lung," he told me. As memento of their adventures together, Maureen had two albums full of photos, including ones of them putting on a green in Africa. From time to time he would stop listening, concentrating instead on the TV mounted overhead, which was tuned constantly to the golf channel. We left before he died—he did live past his birthday—and by Maureen's account his death was ugly. He was delusional. He wanted to die back in her condo. He strangled at last. But I like to think of him as losing himself in the dream of the players on TV.

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As I anticipate my own retirement--66 myself now--golf comes back to haunt me. Clubs from my boyhood have always drifted through our house, two putters, the nine, and six irons; the rest are in my cracked and decaying bag out in our storage shed. Now here is my son David, thin and athletic, 22, just graduating from college. He surprises me with a sudden enthusiasm for golf. He knows that I used to play. He's taken my driver, my 3 wood, and a three iron from the shed, and he and Ben—a pal from the pricey day school where we sacrificed to send him--have visited a driving range in Wellesley. Then Ben's Dad had gone out with Ben for 9 holes and Dave had gone with them, trying and retrying different shots in practice, using Ben's clubs. Now Dave wants me to take him.

I welcome this chance for common ground. We gather my clubs and he directs me turn by turn past the Wellesley hospital and off Rt. 16 out to the spacious, well kept MDC course, where buckets of balls are reasonable and you have your choice of modern, metal-head drivers.

The driving range is behind the club house, and up some stairs: twenty or more tees addressing a low, wide field, with markers from 50 to 250 yards and high net fences to the left and right, shielding the active fairways. A tractor with a scoop and a protected wire-mesh cab crosses back and forth, harvesting the hit balls, and Dave boasts that he and Ben tried to hit it, as if it were a carnival target. The golfers, men, women, varying ages, body types, and skill levels, hit away. We wait until two adjoining tees are free. Dave chops away with a baseball swing, all arms, topping the ball, skying it, or slicing into the net. I help him to adjust his stance and grip, one hand over the other, fingers partly interlocked. I tell him to keep his head down, eye on the ball. In slow motion, facing him, I guide his club: "Keep your head down, think of your left hand leading the swing, push back, imagine a straight line back from the ball, that's it, keep your left arm stiff, don't bend the elbow; lead with your hips first, let your left arm follow, straight, through the ball, and follow through...don't look up, don't push with your right." He tries some practice swings. "Good, but you're still swinging with your arms. Always make your body lead your left arm. Again. And try to close your stance a little." He tees up several more balls, hitting high hooks and slices. Then I step up, and he

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stops to watch. I take my practice swings; my gut is in my way and I'm stiff as I pivot, but I go through my accustomed motions, thwapping the mat. I tee up a ball and take a long time, concentrating. A long time. I want to become the ball. I want to become the ball. All form, slow back swing, down, and through, resulting in a stubby hook. I try again and this time it goes through, though not far. The next few go straight as well then I connect and what feels like one of my old time drives lifts and slices at the 200 yard marker. My best drives here, perhaps every tenth try, go where I aim, but rarely more than 200, and never past 250. "At least they go where you aim, Dad. That's great!" Dave tries again, and this time, unorthodox form or not, really connects. I am breathless watching as his drive soars straight, carries past the 250 marker and keeps rolling. I'm proud and envious and amazed. As we return three or four other times before he leaves for a summer internship abroad (an adventure that I also envy), he is hitting a better percentage of fine shots, and I wish we had time to practice together still more: for me to recover some semblance of my youth's game; and for him to learn the different clubs, the irons, the chips, the sand wedge, the putter, the tricks of deliberate hooks and fades, backspin, downhill, uphill, and side-hill lies. Neither of us is ready to play nine holes, but perhaps we can build towards that, reviving all this past.

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After a stormy adolescence, which we rode out on both sides, Dave settled down and matured in college. He had hated prep school, except for team sports and special friends. In college, after nearly flunking out his freshman year, he bore down and earned B's and A's, majoring in marketing and photography. I've loved to watch him grow. To love a capable girl. To keep trusted friends. To travel. To become thoughtful, and socially confident. And more and more to find work, to make good choices, to manage his own life, to become his own man. In the carry of his ball, I feel my envy of youth, my pride in him and my wish for his life.

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A simple thing, golf. A thing I once did well. A way of life for me, long gone. I am a teacher, an editor, a writer, a husband, a father, in the blue collar suburbs of Boston. I've lived here now most of my life. I've raised my children here. I can't afford a country club membership, even if I wanted one (I don't); nor do I subscribe to the dream of manners, privilege, caste and measure, which golf suggests. Yet golf is partly who I am, and here the legacy persists: from Thralls to Mom; from Thralls, Mom and Dad to Chuck and to me; from Chuck to me, and to his sons; from me to David, and even to my daughter's daughter, Eva. I feel a sentimental swell in my throat as Eva tries to imitate me and putt on our rug. Age 4, she tries hopelessly with one of my outsized putters; then with her plastic toy set. This seems to come from nowhere.