IN THERE SOMEWHERE: A MEMOIR

-------------

A Project
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

-------------

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

-------------

by
Christopher William Cullen

Spring 2009
IN THERE SOMEWHERE: A MEMOIR

A Project

by

Christopher William Cullen

Spring 2009

APPROVED BY THE DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE, INTERNATIONAL, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES:

_________________________________
Susan E. Place, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Robert G. Davidson, Ph.D.
Graduate Coordinator

Robert G. Davidson, Ph.D., Chair

Jeanne E. Clark, Ph.D.

Lynn Houston, Ph.D.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I would like to thank Rob Davidson, my thesis chair, for all his tireless work and effort. His guidance and encouragement pushed me to work harder to be a better writer and to write the best thesis I can. I really appreciate his role as a mentor, not only with this thesis, but during all my time here as both an undergraduate and graduate student.

I also want to thank Jeanne Clark for her passion and instruction. She has truly inspired me and helped me develop my dreams and aspirations as a writer and a writing teacher. I appreciate how she always pushed me to work harder to be the best writer, student and person I can be. She means a lot to me and will always have a special place in my heart.

I would also like to thank Lynn Houston, who was always there for me during the difficult times, and has helped me understand what is expected of me and helped me feel like I belonged here and that I am capable of great things. Truly, she has been great influence and her support really means a lot.

I would like to thank all my professors here at Chico State who have helped me as a student and person and provided guidance and leadership. Their sage advice really means a lot and I appreciate the role they have all played.

I want to thank my close friend and colleague Jen White who has always been supportive, encouraging and caring. I love the conversations we have had about books,
craft and life, and her friendship is something I will always cherish. I want to thank Erik Armstrong for inviting me to his thesis defense in 2008 and for letting me read his thesis and helping me to understand what this difficult process is like. I want to thank all my friends who have always been there for me and have offered tremendous support and understanding during this difficult, stressful time. I want thank my Friday friends for allowing one night a week of fun and sanity. I want to thank my officemates and fellow grad students Hilary Tellesen, Kelly Candelaria, and Amanda Runyan for their support, encouragement, and for helping me whenever I had questions about teaching, citing and other school-related matters.

I want to thank my entire family for putting up with me during this difficult time and always supporting me. You made me feel like you were always in my corner, encouraging me every step along the way. In particular I would like to thank my sister Jamie, my brother-in-law Brian and my nephew Jack for always caring and always believing in me. I would like to thank my cousin Steven, who I often refer to as a brother, for always being there for me, for truly inspiring me and for being a good friend and counselor. Also, I would like to thank my mom Squeezie for listening to me when I was frustrated or on a rant and for always encouraging me and helping with anything I needed. Also, I always appreciated your grammatical help with this and other projects. I would like to thank both of my grandparents for doing your best. Finally I would like to thank my dad, my true best friend, for joking and needling me and also for believing in me and encouraging me no matter what I was working on. I truly love all of you guys and will always remember this. Thanks again. I appreciate it more than words can express!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SECTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Underneath It All</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Critical Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. In There Somewhere: A Memoir</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I, Just a Scare</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II, In there Somewhere</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III, Mulligan</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV, Saying Goodbye</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

IN THERE SOMEWHERE: A MEMOIR
by
Christopher William Cullen
Master of Arts in English
California State University, Chico
Spring 2009

In There Somewhere is a memoir focusing on my family and relationships, and on coming of age and the male identity. This memoir explores the nature of inter-generational male relationships. More specifically, I examine both my relationship with my father and my relationship with my grandfather; I also examine my father’s and grandfather’s relationship. This multi-generational approach allows the reader to understand how the past affects the future and how my grandfather’s and father’s relationship affects my own relationships with both of these two men. The memoir is divided into a critical introduction, which examines and contextualizes theories developed and explored by Bill Roorbach, Tim O’Brien, John Gardner and Charles Baxter, and four full-length chapters. The critical introduction also examines some contemporary memoirs and applies these theoretical ideas all while trying to explain where I fit in the literary landscape. The four subsequent chapters all focus on a particular story, but within each story other memories and events are developed. These flashbacks
help to weave all the chapters together to form one full-length memoir rather than four shorter individual memoirs. Through the progression of the stories this memoir invites the reader to witness a young six-year-old boy learning to play golf and bond with his father change to a more mature adult figure who is forced to grow up and deal with difficult problems and situations. It is a complicated family memoir about love and pain and finding one’s own place in the world and in the family.
SECTION I
Although many topics and ideas are developed throughout this memoir, the main underlying theme is the family. I chose to focus on the family because everybody has families and it is a universal topic which everybody can relate to on some level. More than that, I love my family and it is crucial to me and my success, even though it is also somewhat complicated and in places a little dysfunctional. My focus on family is a very general explanation of the focus of this thesis. A more specific focus is the men in my family: my dad, my grandpa and of course myself and all of our relationships together and how they intertwine and affect one another. Even though my sister, my mom and my grandma have important roles in several of the stories and chapters, this idea of how all the men interact, how we each have distinct and complicated relationships and how those different relationships affect each other, is what this thesis is really about. This idea of the interaction between father and son has been explored for centuries, but in this memoir I take it one step further and don’t just examine my relationship with my father, but also my relationship with my grandfather and finally my father’s complicated and somewhat dysfunctional relationship with my grandfather, his father.

Since I am using a multi-generational approach and examining three relationships and essentially how each of those relationships affect each other, each chapter tends to be focused on a specific event, but at several places within that event I
develop other memories and stories which all connect to this underlying theme of my relationship with these two people. Several of the chapters focus on how, when my father was growing up, my grandpa often drank too much, became violent, abusive and out of control. But I also show how my grandpa always treated my sister and me as any truly loving grandpa would, having us over for dinner, taking us to professional sporting events, going to the movies and our school ceremonies and celebrations and basically caring for us with all his heart. Also, I look at how close my father and I are and how through the years this bond has become so strong that we even consider each other both best friends and father and son.

Through this structure of telling one story at a time, but flashing back to others in the middle of it, I can show the complexities of all three of these relationships and how they interact and affect one another. Looking deeply into both my father and my grandfather has taught me a lot and has allowed to better understand both of them and through that, myself. I always knew my dad and I were close and that a large part of that has to do with what my father and grandfather did not have or share together. However, I never thought by digging into their past I would come to learn some of the reasons why my grandpa acted so badly or why this triggered my dad to have such a strong relationship with me, which I think it did. Also, I think I always took it for granted how close my dad and I were and are and I think this examination of the past has shown me what a great gift this is. I didn’t try to sugarcoat any of these stories or characters because then it would be changing this memoir into fiction and would be breaking a major part of what makes it so powerful, the truth. Bill Roorbach comments on this in his introduction to Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth stating, “A reader has a right to
expect that what is represented as true and accurate is true and accurate” (5). I tried to follow this belief as much as I could. When it came to the portrayal of my grandpa, his later years I remember well, but for the early material I had to go back and interview both my father and mother extensively and then weave that together with the information I already had and stories I already knew. Again, when my grandpa acted poorly I didn’t downplay it or soften it, but rather did my best to tell it like it was. My dad was a little easier to develop since almost everything I tell and show about him I remember, but what is interesting is that these old stories of my grandpa help give complexity to not only his character, but to my dad’s as well. I think and hope what we are left with in the end is a beautiful but complicated family memoir about love and pain and the differences between generations.

Another major theme that is developed in this thesis is coming of age and manhood. Through the progression of this memoir you see me go from a six-year-old-boy learning to play golf and sports with my father, learning to bond and understand what men and boys do, to a more mature college graduate who takes on a lot of responsibility and pressure when my father gets ill and my mother and I are forced to take him to the hospital and be strong for the whole family. The audience witnesses the boy transform into an adult and watches him question exactly what that means and exactly how that happens only in the end to learn it the hard way by being forced to grow up in a tough situation.

***
There are many writers I admire and revere and several of these authors have influenced my work, not only through their own creative writing, but also through their published thoughts and ideas on the subject, all of which has taught me to better understand the craft of writing creatively. I will begin with an author I already mentioned earlier, Bill Roorbach, and I will tie what he says about complexity to the structure of this memoir. Roorbach writes,

“Good creative nonfiction is layered deeply. A chronological narrative is never simply a string of events, but rings with metaphor and emotion and information and character. A personal essay is never only an idea, but an idea illustrated with experience, an idea juxtaposed to competing ideas, and exposed to emotion. And one of the complexities of good creative nonfiction is implicit acceptance of the simple awful truth that people aren’t gods and can be sure of very little.” (7)

This quote definitely relates to my memoir. This idea of layering ties in perfectly with how I structured this memoir. As mentioned before, I focused each chapter on a specific story, but within that story I included flashbacks and other memories and events where I examine other characters and ideas. The flashbacks weave their way into each chapter, thus creating the layering effect. This ends up working the same way that Roorbach describes in which ideas are juxtaposed to competing ideas. To think about this a little more specifically, let us consider my first chapter “Just a Scare.” The focus of the chapter is a health scare my mom and I experienced with my dad while I was living at home between graduating college and starting grad school. However, within that story I flashback to the Loma Prieta Earthquake to show how strong my mother was in a difficult situation. I also flashback to the last few years to show how close my dad’s and my relationship is, and finally to when I was six-years-old and started playing golf with my dad. On one level these flashbacks add depth to the characters and they also show
why this scare had such a significant impact on me. They show us in action and show why I am so close to these people. Finally, they make this idea of becoming a man and growing up more complex. I still love these people and have a strong past with both of them, but I am also learning to become a man on my own without them. By structuring this chapter in this way, and the rest of the memoir, it makes the text more complex which allows it to be more than just one simple idea, but rather an idea illustrated with experience juxtaposed to competing ideas all deeply rooted in emotion.

Another person I would like to turn attention to is Tim O’Brien. During a question and answer session he gave at George Mason University on September 19, 2005, which aired on CSPAN2, O’Brien was asked about a number of topics involving craft, but the part I found most interesting was when he was asked what advice he would offer students trying to write an effective biography. O’Brien replied, “Look for the pain. By looking at it, I mean look at the bad stuff you have done in the world because that’s crucial to tension in books... Look for the pain in your life as a starting point.” I agree with O’Brien here, and I also believe tension is the key to good storytelling. If the story doesn’t deal with difficult topics it will not be interesting. Most likely it will be plain and flat. Pain, as difficult as it is to admit, is interesting. We can all relate to it, because we all have experienced it at some time or another. As O’Brien went on to say himself, “We all commit acts of sin in the world and that’s largely what comedy and tragedy are both made out of.” This is also very true. My favorite stories are ones that deal with difficult decisions, situations and problems. They almost always have sad, disturbing, and frustrating acts or characters and they often deal with morality and right and wrong. However, they are not simple tales where it is easy to know how to react or know how
you would feel if you were in that story or situation. It is hard to walk away feeling like
you know exactly how you would react to similar situations because if it were easy to
understand or easy to hear or read about, then it would also be easy to forget and would
be a waste of your time. Tension and pain keeps you reading and makes you think and in
the end I think it is why we continue to read and write stories. There is something to say
and there is also something to read. To put it metaphorically, it has weight.

In my own memoir writing, although it is a little different, I have definitely
taken O’Brien’s advice to heart. In my stories I did look for the pain in my life, not
necessarily the sins I have committed, but the difficult situations and relationships that I
have dealt with first hand, and are hard for me to talk about, and, sometimes to
understand how I actually feel about them.

After stating that his biggest advice is to look for the pain in your life, O’Brien
states, “Also be honest about it. It’s so easy to write a sentence ‘I did something’ and not
really tell the whole story. Tell it all. It is easy to do by pretending no one will ever read it
and then you can blurt it all out. But to be partly honest is to be dishonest in the end.”

I don’t think O’Brien is saying you to have to write these stories one hundred
percent true to how it happened. Obviously you have to select which details are relevant,
and you have to make choices. If we didn’t omit certain parts or make choices,
everything we read and write would be considerably longer and less interesting. No
matter what genre you are writing in, you always have to make choices while drafting.
These choices could range from how much to show or tell or what type of information is
crucial to the story and advances your plot and what type of information can be left out.
No, I think O’Brien means revealing the difficult parts and how they truly happened. He
is saying that you have to be honest about the painful and often dark parts of your stories. You have to tell it as it is. To be partly honest is to be dishonest after all. In my work this is pivotal. Obviously, I am dealing with some tricky topics, like the complicated and dark history of my grandparents’ and parents’ relationships, as well as my thoughts on the subject. If I weren’t honest about how I truly felt, or if I didn’t tell the whole story and what was really said and happened, then this memoir would be cheap. In a way it would be fake. The only way this memoir works and is interesting and has impact is if I do tell it how it happened and if I am honest about how I feel. If I don’t, I’m lying to myself and I’m lying to my audience, and something about that is just wrong. Plain and simple.

I would like to sugarcoat some of these stories, but that is not moral and that is not true. Like I emphatically state in the chapter “In There Somewhere,” I wish some of these events never happened, and I wish my grandparents hadn’t acted this way, but they did, and in order for this to work in this chapter and others where I deal with these heavy issues, I have to be honest about it. Otherwise this memoir wouldn’t be art and wouldn’t be worth reading.

This leads right into another great artist who has had a significant impact on my thoughts about art and about the purpose of what I write. In this way he has also had a significant impact on not only the purpose of my writing, but through that what I actually write and how I do it. The person I am talking about here is John Gardner. Gardner is famous for both his own art, which is truly amazing, but also for his thoughts about art. In his book, On Moral Fiction, he discusses many topics, but the one that speaks the most to me is the purpose of art and what art should be. Gardner writes in the first chapter,
My basic message throughout this book is as old as the hills, drawn from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante and the rest, and standard in Western Civilization down through the 18th century... the traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. (5)

This message has become a base for my own beliefs about art and is a belief I constantly turn to and remind myself what it means.

To me, this quote is far from simple. Gardner believes that our art or writing has meaning and substance and we need to be aware of that and use it for good rather than evil. Essentially, what we write has a purpose, and if we ignore that purpose or use it strictly for our own selfish means then we are debasing the beauty of art and writing. We, as artists, have a responsibility to make our art true and to embrace that what we write has meaning, that it should have meaning and that it should embrace the beauty of life and civilization. Our art should help people, not hurt them. Even when we sometimes deal with difficult topics and feelings, as I clearly have in some of this work, we need to do it with a purpose and that purpose is to help, to improve, to make better. Specifically in this memoir I try embrace this idea of making art true by telling these stories exactly how they happened even though that is sometimes difficult. The idea is to show that all of these characters are not always good people and their actions are also not always good. The purpose of this is to embrace that life is not always simple and that often our relationships are far from simple. This hopefully reaches those who have experienced similar problems and difficulties, showing them that even though we sometimes are put into difficult situations and have complicated relationships with certain people, we can still love these people even though we do have issues with them. It shows how complicated life is while still embracing the beauty of it all. To embrace the truth and
then to embrace what that truth means and what lessons that truth teaches us is art’s purpose and it should be the purpose of what we write.

When you think about this in connection with another of Gardner’s quotes that comes later in the book, it has even more meaning. Gardner writes, “For great art, even concern is not enough. Great art celebrates life’s potential, offering a vision unmistakably and unsentimentally rooted in love” (83). Without love we are worthless. Without love we are cold, soulless human beings. We are nothing. In order for our art to be art, in order for it to have meaning, to touch or heal, to embrace, to comfort, to sometimes frustrate or contrast, it must be rooted in love and it must be true. We must realize our art has purpose, it does affect people’s lives, and we need to embrace that beauty and craft with that purpose in mind.

To me this pairs perfectly with O’Brien’s thoughts about telling the truth. Art has to be real and we have to believe what we write, and more than that, we need to tell it as it is, and embrace that truth. What we are putting on the page, what moment we are capturing, the meaning we are developing can’t be fake. It can’t be contrived. It needs to be true. It needs to be honest, and if it is sad or frustrating or difficult, even more the reason it needs to be true and honest. It needs to be rooted in love. Not just the gushy love, but the real everyday love: the love for our craft, the love for the beauty of the world, the love for not knowing everything and embracing that concept, the love for those around us, the love for the beauty of mankind, the love for what is real and what we as artists can make real. Again, we have a responsibility and we must, as true artists, embrace that responsibility and let it shine through our work.
This ties directly in with my final quote from Gardner: “An artist is someone who believes in art, who believes that art reflects something which is real in life, who tries to see and reveal to others what life is in his own time by making it art” (169). Besides his work and influence, Gardner has a special place in my heart, not only because I respect his thoughts and his own writing which I do, but also because he has close ties to my college, Chico State. Gardner was a professor in the English Department in the late 1950s and early 1960s. More than that, while he was there he worked with another famous writer, and another one of my favorite artists, Raymond Carver. Carver describes their relationship and how influential Gardner was in the foreword to Gardner’s *On Becoming a Novelist*. This story was very important to me and to my dreams and aspirations of becoming a writer because this story showed me that it was possible to succeed. After all, if Carver, a nobody at the time, could go through this program and eventually evolve into the literary genius he later became, then why not me? In this way, this simple story, and the connection to my ambitions to be a writer, all originated from these two literary geniuses and I am deeply indebted to them for this reason.

Carver also has an influence on my work for another reason. Not just because he helped me realize my ambition of being a writer, or because he went to the same school as me, even if it was only for a year, rather Carver’s unique style is something I have always appreciated and something I have truly embraced. When I was still in high school and had an early unrealized joy for writing, my mom used to compare me to Ernest Hemingway. She said my writing was simple and direct and, just like Hemingway’s, it was also beautiful and had meaning. She talked about his simple declarative sentences and compared me to him. This comment really meant a lot to me.
and I took it to heart for many years to follow. Hemingway, like Carver, has always been one of my favorite writers. There was something about his style and how he dealt with topics that just fascinated me and because of this I read everything from him that I could. As I got to college I started reading Carver and I started realizing that his sentence style was very similar to Hemingway’s. They wrote stories differently, but they were far from opposites when it came to sentence style. As I examined this connection closely I learned that both were renowned for their simple prose. More and more I read both of these authors and tried to learn as much as I could about them. As I wrote more, my style changed some, and I am not sure if I still write in this simple declarative way anymore, but regardless they both created curiosity in my mind and made me pay attention to craft and how we write our stories. They were my first teachers and I learned from their writing. To this day when I go to grab a book off the shelf they are the first two authors I turn to.

Another great writer whose thoughts about writing have influenced my work is Charles Baxter. Baxter’s *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction* is a book-length collection of essays written about the craft of writing fiction. Even though I am writing a memoir rather than fiction, I still believe his thoughts on ending stories with no true insight and about characterization apply since characterization is a crucial part of memoirs and fiction and since sometimes even memoirs end with no true insight. One particular place I think applies is the idea of both an intelligent audience and letting the writing speak for itself without a moral summary at the story’s or memoir’s conclusion. Baxter describes in his essay “Against Epiphanies” the idea of possibly ending stories...
with no true insight. He mainly uses Borges as an example here and discusses this in detail. Baxter writes,

We can have stories of real consequence in which no discursive insight appears, or in which the insights are shown to be false (this is a kind of story one often finds in Borges). What if, as Raymond Carver argued, insights don’t help and only make things worse? We can still see people acting meaningfully or stewing in their own juices or acting out of the depths of their bewilderment, and we can make of that what we will. A story, as Borges has shown, can be a series of clues but not a solution, an enfolding of a mystery instead of a revelation. It can contain the images without the attached discursive morality. (54)

Now obviously this applies more to fiction writing, where personal reflection is not always as essential to the success of the story, but I still find this terribly interesting and can make some sense of it when applying it to memoir writing. Essentially, what he is saying in terms of fiction writing is that you don’t need to spell everything out for your audience. Your story doesn’t have to have a happy ending, and, in fact, doesn’t really even need a neat, clean ending. It can end in ambiguity or paradox or in a mistaken realization, something you thought you were beginning to understand only to find out by the end he or she is talking about the complete opposite thing you were coming to grasp. It can even end when it feels like it is just beginning. I think Carver is the perfect example here, and his story “The Father,” from Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? demonstrates this principle. In that story, a family discusses who this unnamed baby looks like and resembles. While discussing this, the focus changes to who the father looks like. Then, out of the blue, it just ends without coming to a conclusion, but simply stating that he turned around in his chair and his face was white and expressionless. The insight here is that this story and others like it are focused on the idea that on a close reading the audience can make sense of them and can come to this understanding even though it is
not explicitly stated. The audience is smart enough to put the pieces together for themselves, and in that way, the real role of the writer is to lay out the pieces in a way that make sense so that the audience can do this work.

I believe this ties in directly with memoir writing. Even though reflection is a necessary element of memoirs, the moral doesn’t have to be explicitly explained. The insight can be ambiguous or paradoxical and yet the memoir can still be complete and whole. You must reflect to be able to write a good memoir, but the insight you finally reach can be that you don’t fully understand something and possibly never will. Reflection is essential to success, but you can still avoid coming to concrete, fixed conclusions. Although I have not written a memoir or story exactly like this yet, I have written parts I feel do fit with this idea. In the chapter “In there Somewhere” I state that even though I don’t fully understand it all, I am not happy with my grandparents’ behavior and I am not sure I can ever forgive them. This might change as I grow up and see these events from a different perspective, but it is important for me that this stays as it is. It is how I feel and even though it isn’t neat and clean it is how I feel it needs to be. It is in a way slightly ambiguous, but that does not mean it is not whole and complete, because I believe it is.

I am also terribly interested in this idea because my favorite stories tend to end this exact way. I love to read stories where the reader is truly engaged, but is forced to do all the work at the end to make sense of them. It is what we, as English majors, are trained to do and thus I love this. I don’t enjoy writing parable-like endings, even though I fear some of my stories and memoirs do end this way, and Baxter is encouraging or even more emphatically stating that stories, whether fiction or memoir, don’t need this
insight to stand on their own, be whole, and be masterpieces. They are great just the way they are. In Baxter’s own words, “Sometimes readers are not going to be helped along by the stories they read. Literature is not an instruction manual” (61).

The idea of characterization and dealing with difficult and sometimes disturbingly dark topics and characters is something that Baxter also discusses. I think this has influenced me and applies to this memoir and some of the ideas I already wrote about. Baxter spends a great deal of time discussing this idea of characterization in his essay “On Defamiliarization,” but I will jump ahead to the point he has made that I have found most interesting. Baxter writes, “Instead of making our narrative events and our characters more colorful, we might make them thicker, more undecidable, more contradictory and unrecognizable” (37). Baxter means we shouldn’t be afraid of the dark and gloomy and making our characters complex and often contradictory. It is okay to make our characters and scenes both good and bad. It is okay to make a character a loving grandparent on one level and a horrible abusive husband and father on another level. It is okay to make them paradoxical. It is okay because on one level that makes for a more complex character and a better read, and on another more important level it represents more closely how real people act and behave. In memoir writing, where our characters are real life people, we must show our characters’ complexities. We are rarely totally good or totally bad, but rather normally somewhere in between. It is okay to love someone and hate them at the same time. It is okay to represent someone as a good person even though they have done bad things in their life. This is how life works, so why shouldn’t it be how stories work? This ties perfectly into my grandpa’s character in this memoir. He has done some horrible things in his past and I can never truly forgive
some of his behavior. At the same time the grandpa I knew and loved was not like this. The grandpa I knew and loved was always kind and nice and he always treated my sister and me as any loving grandparent would. Nevertheless, at some points he did behave unforgivably. This is also interesting because I think this ties back to the idea I mentioned earlier when discussing O’Brien and telling the truth. I have to show my whole grandpa, the good and the bad parts because after all, “To be partly honest is to be dishonest in the end.”

***

It is difficult to explain where I fit in the literary landscape especially in memoir writing because this genre has grown considerably in the last ten years. One thing I can say for sure is that I don’t see myself as strictly a memoir writer. Two of my favorite authors come to mind when explaining this: Hemingway and Tobias Wolff. One of my all time favorite books is Hemingway’s memoir A Moveable Feast. When you try to classify Hemingway, most of the time you think of him as a fiction writer. You think about some of his great novels, like The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms, and some of his short stories, like “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” and he seems easy to classify as a fiction writer. However, this memoir breaks that mold. This memoir is a beautiful true story about Hemingway and his family in Paris in the 1920s and his early years of writing before he was clearly established, successful and famous. A large part of why I admire Hemingway is because he is both a fiction writer and a memoir writer.

Wolff is exactly the same way. He has written great works of short fiction, like “Say Yes” and “The Rich Brother,” which come from his book Back in the World,
and he has also written great memoirs, like *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost World*. He won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1985 and his first memoir *This Boy's Life* was so good it was eventually turned into a movie starring Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio. Just like Hemingway, he is an established and famous fiction and memoir writer just like I hope to be.

Right now I write mainly memoirs and short fiction, but I hope to write some full-length novels later in life. I consider myself, like Wolff and Hemingway, to be both a memoir writer and a fiction writer. I enjoy both and I constantly write in both forms and I don’t see myself dropping one for the other. To put it simply I am writer, regardless of classification or genre.

Getting back to this question of where I fit in all of this, I can say that I like memoirs about myself and my experiences just like Wolff’s and Hemingway’s memoirs are about themselves. Right now I tend to write about my family and those around me, and the stories focus on deep and often complicated issues and themes. They are not simple by any means, but they are not frustratingly complex and abstract either. I like writing about family because everybody has families and deals with difficulties within families, and so on some level everybody can relate. Also, I do have some difficult memories and feelings about my own family and therefore I have something to work out and to say, which is all the more reason to write these stories. All of this might change some as I get older and evolve, but right now that is as simply as I can put it.

There are also several authors and memoirs I respect and revere which I also think helps to classify where I fit. As mentioned before I really like all of Wolff’s memoirs, but I especially enjoyed and would like to focus on his first memoir *This Boy’s*
Life. In this story he writes about his difficult family and upbringing, and like me, some tricky father and step-father issues and incidents as well. Early in the story Wolff changes his first name to Jack, in part to honor his favorite author Jack London, and in part to remove himself from his father, who abandoned Wolff and his mother right after his birth. He explains and shows a lot about his and his mom’s new life in Utah, and then later when they move to Seattle, he describes life with his new stepfather, Dwight, who constantly criticizes and belittles Wolff for both real and imagined flaws in his personality. Wolff doesn’t make himself out to be perfect or completely innocent in all of this. In one scene he gets in a fight with Arthur Gayle, a known loner and sissy. Ironically, though Wolff grows to regret this incident, Dwight finally takes an interest and teaches him how to fight, loving that he is picking on the weaker boy.

This is interesting and important because it ties back to some of the points I made earlier. All of these incidents and stories go back to Roebach’s argument about layering nonfiction and how it is never simply about one idea, but rather an idea illustrated in experience competing with other complicated ideas. This is not the first time Wolff has dealt with a tricky father figure in this memoir and each experience is slightly different in both good and bad ways. In the case of Roy, his mom’s last husband, they share a lot together and Wolff admires a lot about Roy, like how he teaches him how to shoot, even though Roy admittedly is also a pretty bad guy. Wolff’s memoir is complicated, just like several of these relationships are complicated, and it is layered deeply just like Roebach thinks good nonfiction should be.

This also ties back to O’Brien and looking for the pain in your life and telling it all and being honest. Although it is impossible to know whether Wolff is being
completely honest, it does appear that he is. He isn’t sugarcoating these events and he is not making himself out to be perfectly innocent either. He did start the fight with Gayle and Dwight was not present or involved. Wolff takes credit for this and later even admits his guilt and regret. He is looking at the pain in his life and also the bad things he has done and using that to tell his story. For the most part it seems like he is telling it as it is and he is embracing that truth, which allows us to embrace that same truth. This also makes this story somewhat moral in Gardner’s terms in that he is dealing with difficult topics and feelings and he is dealing with them for a purpose and that purpose is to embrace this truth and to embrace what that truth means both to him and to those who read this.

I also like Frank Conroy’s memoir Stop-Time. It is a coming-of-age story, which also deals with difficult family history, just like my memoir does, mainly involving Conroy’s own father and past. Conroy begins his memoir describing his father and how for most of his life he lived in various expensive rest homes for people who had suffered from nervous breakdowns. He goes on to explain his father never suffered from a breakdown, but he did have a serious drinking problem and often his behavior was odd to say the least. He explains how his dad was convinced when Conroy was just six-months-old he was fated to become a homosexual. He describes a story his dad used to tell him when he was eight about a man who sat on an open knife blade on a park bench. Even at eight, Conroy knew this story was a lie, but even now he is unsure why his father would tell his young son this story. Conroy then goes on to describe how his family went on a cruise one time, and after taking a joke too far, his father was escorted off the ship in a straitjacket and forced to go to another hospital, a hospital he would never escape.
Conroy’s memoir is brilliant and easy to follow and also easy to relate to. He doesn’t show everything, but rather gives brief sketches and the proportion of what is shown seems to be just right. He tells about some difficult times, but he doesn’t soften or play down these events, but rather, brings them to life on the page. He seems to tell the whole story and is truthful about the difficult parts as well as the happier times just like O’Brian argues he should. He embraces the truth and lets it shine.

The father character in this story ties directly back to Baxter’s thoughts on making characters thicker, more undecidable, more contradictory and unrecognizable, rather than more colorful. Obviously this character isn’t the perfect father figure, far from it in fact. We learn that his father died when Conroy was just twelve, and yet a great deal of detail and attention is paid to this man and the influence he had on Conroy. As readers we never really love this character, but we are intrigued by him and want to know more. Conroy develops his father not as a great man, but as a complicated and sometimes disturbing person. He is not all bad. He is his father, after all, but he is also not the best father figure. He is not so much colorful, but rather, as Baxter would put it, thick and undecidable.

I also like Frank McCourt’s memoirs Angela’s Ashes, Tis: A Memoir, and Teacher Man, which like Hemingway’s, Wolff’s and Conroy’s, do focus on his life and family and some of the hardships he faced. In Angela’s Ashes, McCourt describes being born in Brooklyn in 1930, but after his sister died when he was only a few weeks old, the family moves back to Limerick, Ireland. Within a year of moving, both of McCourt’s younger twin brothers die and the family is poor and must deal with several difficulties. The family lives in an insufficient, lower class neighborhood in a house that regularly
floods and must share the only bathroom with all their neighbors. McCourt’s father has a severe drinking problem and seldom works. When he does manage to find a job, he almost always spends his paycheck in the local bar, forcing the family to survive on what is essentially Irish welfare. When McCourt is a teenager, he works in a post office, as a newspaper and magazine delivery boy, and as a money lender. Through all of this, McCourt realizes his dream of moving back to the United States, and in the end, he sails back to New York as a nineteen-year-old man.

Like several of the memoirs mentioned thus far, McCourt’s memoirs deal with his difficult family issues and several of the hard situations he has experienced. Again, focusing on O’Brien, he doesn’t sugarcoat anything and doesn’t tell partial truths. It seems clear through his details and descriptions he is honest about everything, including his father’s selfish drinking problem, and he embraces these adversities and the pain he experienced and puts on the page for the audience to experience, understand and make sense of for themselves. In this way he truly embraces what Gardner writes about in *On Moral Fiction* regarding what a true artist is and does. McCourt “reflects something which is real in life... and reveal[s] to others what life is in his own time by making it art” (Gardner 169). He has confronted his difficult past and presents it how it happened and what his life was like so that audience can understand what he and other immigrant families faced during this time period. His memoirs embrace his poor background and his difficult upbringing. These memoirs, like mine, focus on real everyday problems with those around him, including his immediate family, and that is one reason why I like them so much.
These coming of age tales, as well as dealing with these difficult family issues and situations, which all of the writers mentioned have written about, really fascinates me and I love them and write memoirs like them myself and that is one reason I feel a connection to these authors. We all write about difficulties in our own lives and how that has impacted our relationships, our upbringing and our views on life and family. Also, the selection and proportion of what these writers show and develop and what they seem to skip over and move through quickly has taught me a lot about being a selective or tactful writer. It has taught me to look for what is crucial and vital and keeps the story and plot moving forward in my own writing and to be very careful and have a sharp eye for what I need and what I can leave out. It has taught me essentially how to write tight, developed, polished stories where just the right proportion is shown and developed. Finally, I admire how these stories are complex and easy to relate to and show us what art truly is and should be. They have taken some of the theories which I described earlier from Gardner, O’Brien, Roebach, and Baxter and they have put these ideas and thoughts into context through their writing. It has allowed me to better understand these theoretical concepts and to embrace them fully. I have learned a lot from these writers and I admire what they were able to do with their art and I hope that one day I write as well as them and maybe even be considered like them and in the same circle.
CHAPTER I

JUST A SCARE

With a pounding headache and a nauseous stomach ache I waited for my dad’s footsteps down the hall. I was hoping it wouldn’t happen, just like I always did, but I knew that any minute my father would walk in, force me to wake, and wouldn’t leave until I was up and moving. It often worked out that way. Besides being the biggest planner on the planet, my father was also obsessed about doing things on time. Now, technically, it was both my parents’ day off and my own, so there was no reason why the day had to be so planned out. True, we were going shopping for clothes for my sister’s wedding, but it wasn’t as if the stores were going to close if we didn’t get there by ten o’clock. Unfortunately, though, I knew there was no use fighting it. My dad often acted in this exact manner. He would make a plan and since he was an early riser, the plan normally started early. Much earlier, in fact, than I was used to or wanted to get up. So I tried to sleep and get a few more minutes’ rest before the inevitable was bound to happen. I knew that any minute I would hear them and that would be it. I knew the sounds of his steps down the hall even when I was asleep, but they never seemed to come.

Just then, as I was sleeping, an unmistakable sound, different than any I was used to was heard. It resembled fingernails scratching down the chalkboard, but wasn’t quite that clear or distinct, and sent chills down my spine. I turned over in bed and tuned in a little closer. As I thought about it I realized it sounded more like my mom shrieking
in pain, or possibly fear, but not everyday fear, something far more serious, and I thought I even heard her scream my name. In my half-awake state I couldn’t make out exactly what had happened or if that was actually what I heard, but one thing was clear, it was definitely different than the footsteps I was waiting for and expecting.

“Christopher! I need you! Get up and get out here!” my mom screamed in a terrified trembling tone that instantaneously caused me to spring out of bed and rush down the hall. By the fear in her voice I could tell immediately that something was terribly wrong. I ran toward the living room, trying not to trip and fall being that I was struggling to put some sweatpants on over the boxers I had been sleeping in. But still, even with my struggling, I was there in matter of seconds. Half-dressed, hung over, and feeling pretty rough, I was now attentive and wide awake, realizing that we had a serious problem and I was going to have to help out and, in part, be in charge of the situation.

“What’s wrong,” I asked instantly in a worried tone as I scanned the scene. My mom was still in her pajamas, leaning over my father. My dad was sitting down on the sofa with a strange look on his face as if he were only half there. He was wearing his workout clothes and was sweating profusely. He had just started a new diet, mainly because he weighed nearly three hundred pounds, and it included riding the stationary workout bike in the garage every morning. As I looked at him more closely his skin was pale and clammy and his hair was soaking wet. He didn’t look me in the eye and he kept examining the room in a strange, peculiar way like he had never been in this place before, but recognized certain items like our furniture and some of the knick-knacks on the table like his keys and wallet. The sun was shining brightly through the big five foot window in our living room and the kitchen still had a scent of the chicken dinner from the night
before. My father’s antsy, unusual behavior was startling and as I looked at him a little
closer I could tell he was clearly nervous. My mother was asking him questions.

“Something is wrong with Dad. I think something might have happened. He
doesn’t remember where we are, what we are doing today, or even what month it is. I am
not sure what to do,” my mom explained very quickly and nervously while moving
around the room, unable to sit still.

I stopped her and calmly demanded she explain what happened.

“Well, he came in from working out and he looked kind of funny. I asked him
when he wanted to go to downtown Sacramento to go shopping and he looked really
confused. Then he asked why we were going that far and I told him it was only about
twenty minutes away. Then he acted even weirder. I started asking him questions and he
wasn’t sure about a lot of things. He didn’t even remember that Jamie was engaged. We
need to talk to somebody right now,” my mom demanded anxiously.

While the two of us contemplated our next move my dad sat dumbfounded on
the sofa. He mumbled to himself, trying to figure out where he was, what he was doing
and why he was so confused and disoriented.

After a few minutes my mom ordered me, like a military officer commanding
her troops, to watch after my dad while she called his doctor.

While she was on the phone I started asking my dad easy questions that he
should have known the answers to right away. The problem was all he could manage to
say was, “I don’t know. Sorry, Chris, I just don’t remember,” in a frustrated, worried
tone. I asked him where we were, what the date was and what we were doing today and
he couldn’t answer. He tried his best to remember, but in the end all he could do was sit
there puzzled and frustrated. He wasn’t sure about a lot of things, but what scared me most is that he thought we still lived in Napa and owned a furniture store there.

The summer before, and for eight years prior to that, my parents did own a furniture store in Napa. However, last summer their landlord was given the chance to build a hotel in the same location as the store so he bought out the lease and we decided to sell the house and move to Sacramento. We loved the wine country, but as much as we loved the beauty and the culture, we never seemed to make a lot of friends. Everyone seemed to be so stuck up and unfriendly. Also, the furniture store we owned was nice, but it never really took off like we had imagined. Because of all these reasons my parents considered moving. It didn’t matter that much to me, since most of my time was spent away at college at that point, and my sister hadn’t lived with my parents in years, so the decision was truly about what they wanted. They looked into the housing market in Sacramento and realized they could own a much bigger, nicer home, and they could also open a new furniture store, so they agreed to move.

I moved into our new home six months later, between graduating college and starting grad school. My parents and I had a mutual respect for each other. We had agreed that we weren’t going to go back to the way things used to be. I was grown up now. I was an adult. I still relied on my parents some, but I wasn’t dependent on them. The fact that my dad didn’t remember any of this was really starting to scare me and it was also scaring him. Knowing that he was in some trouble, and that my mom was clearly shaken up, I knew that it was my job to stay calm and to make the right kinds of choices.

A few moments later my mom got off the phone with my dad’s doctor.
“They said to call 911. It could be a stroke, but they’re not sure. They said we shouldn’t risk anything and that we need to get an ambulance right away,” my mom quickly announced, scratching her uncombed hair, her glasses still on, and her pajamas dragging on the floor as she moved quickly back to my dad. She explained that it was important that we didn’t move him until the ambulance got there and that we needed to stay clam. She called an ambulance and explained what had happened and where we lived while I stayed with my dad and tried to comfort him and help him relax.

After the ambulance had left my driveway and was in transit to the hospital one of my neighbors named Rick came over. He asked me if everything was all right and assured me if we needed any help any of the neighbors would be willing to pitch in. Rick had never been especially outgoing and I sensed he never really liked us, but here he was offering help. By this point everything was starting to seep in, and I felt my knees start to tremble. I assured him we would be all right. I had to do this rather quickly and abruptly, though, for I could feel myself losing it and didn’t want to appear the least bit weak in front of my neighbor. He shook my hand and I thanked him and then I ran inside so that my mom and I could go to the hospital. We climbed in our Ford Explorer and we rushed off.

***

All morning long I kept waiting for my mom to break down. It seemed unusual to me that she remained so strong and in control. I didn’t understand it. Normally my mom is the nicest, sweetest woman in the world, but she also is very sensitive and easily prone to getting hurt. She isn’t weak by any means, but I would have thought
something like this would have wrecked her. I couldn’t fathom where she pulled the strength. It seemed like no matter what happened, she remained strong and in control. Part of me was expecting her to be crying and hysterical, but I’m not exactly sure why. She had never behaved this way in serious situations before, but I still expected her to take it harder when it was my dad who was in serious trouble and not an everyday accident or problem. Then again, I also knew she was going to be strong in front of my father so that he wouldn’t worry. However, now he was gone in route to the hospital and she was still calm and clear. She was as strong as a brick wall, sturdy and unbreakable.

***

Every October and April when I was younger my father went on business trips to North Carolina. He had been in the furniture business a long time and for the most part was very successful. Twice a year, North Carolina held the biggest furniture show in the country and anybody and everybody from the furniture business attended. On October 17, 1989, the day of the big Loma Prieta Earthquake, my dad was on a plane to North Carolina for the furniture show. Partly, I remember it so well because it was Game 3 of the Battle of Bay World Series. The San Francisco Giants, my team, were losing to the Oakland Athletics, my dad’s team, and they were about to play Game 3 in San Francisco. When the earthquake happened I was at the top our court in Danville, California playing baseball, and my sister was coming home from a field trip. Why I bring up this event is again in this situation my mom was as strong as steel. After the 6.9 quake, my mom ran up to see if I was all right and then again became the general and was calm and clear. Later on that night when my sister came home, my mom took control. We went out to get
supplies like flashlights and radios and then we went home. We all got in the Big Bed, which is what we used to call my parents’ king size bed. We crawled under the covers and then every few minutes we would pull the covers back and yell names of fast food restaurants.

“One, Two, Three, BURGER KING!” we would yell and jump out from under the covers.

***

In difficult situations my mom always came out on top. Looking back now, it doesn’t surprise me that she remained so strong that day. Yes, she is sensitive, and does cry from time to time, but never in serious situations. In serious situations she tends to be the only one who is composed. In times like this she always seems to come out on top and becomes the leader. She tells people where to go and what to do. She is direct, yet calm and soothing. I don’t know why I expected her to act otherwise, but she didn’t. I guess when I think about this, it really says more about me than it does her. Did I think she was weak and volatile? Was this another case of the same old sexist stereotype that women are frantic in serious situations or was I buying into the same old family assumptions that fathers are stronger than mothers? I had always prided myself on being a feminist, and believed strongly in equal rights and beliefs, and now was I acting like the exact person I often despised, believing women and mothers can’t handle the heat? I don’t want to believe this is true, but I have to admit I did expect her to be a lot more fragile and upset. I’m not sure if this is the sexist stereotype that I am describing or if goes to back to the fact that everyone in my family expected my mom to be the weak one.
Everyone expected that since my dad was so big and strong that he “wore the pants” in the relationship. This wasn’t really the case, but my aunts and uncles always assumed it was. She never was weak or fragile, but, as the young twenty-four year old still searching and trying to become an adult, I did expect this behavior. I’m not sure if I was in fact following the same old sexist stereotype or the typical family assumptions, but I never underestimated my mom again.

***

On the drive to the hospital I could tell she was nervous and was worried about my dad, but still she remained strong. We speculated about the different causes of the attack and we discussed when it would be appropriate to call my sister. In general, my sister didn’t handle these types of serious problems well. She had a way of breaking down in which she didn’t deal with the problem. She just pretended everything was normal. She went about her regular routine and would block out any and all emotions regarding the event. For these reasons we were worried about calling her before we knew what actually happened. However, we also didn’t want to neglect her either. Then my mom remembered she worked that day, and that we couldn’t get a hold of her until nighttime, so we agreed we would wait to call her until then.

***

While we discussed and contemplated all the possibilities, my mind began to wander a little. I started worrying about how serious this could be. I started wondering if my dad was ever going to be the same or if he was going to be a vegetable. I started to question how serious his weight problem was and wondered if he should have started the
diet he was currently on much earlier. I started worrying about how out of shape my dad was and that he was much older than he used to be. I thought about how close we were and worried he would be different after this. I started to think back to the last couple of years and several memories rushed through my head.

***

After I left for college, we still played golf together, but being that I was much better than my dad now, he had turned his focus to playing pool, always acting competitively, so he could still beat me at something. He bought a pool table after my grandpa’s death and set it up in the garage. When I came home we would play eight-ball for hours and he would needle and tease me and we would constantly joke around and be sarcastic, having fun just being father and son.

“Oh, come on, Junior, you know you’ll never beat your old man,” he would bait me while playing. “You still need training wheels on your bike. Don’t think you can out play Pops,” he would say while dropping a few balls.

For several years now we had been calling each other best friends. I know some people believe for a child to truly become an adult they must break away from their parents and become independent and a free spirit. This was not exactly the case with our relationship. I was still an adult and most of the time he respected and showed that, but we were also still extremely close, and we both enjoyed that immensely. When I was growing up, he would lecture me and tell me how to do things better. He would mildly talk down to me from time to time and when I stepped out of line he treated me like a child. Now he respected my opinions and decisions, like what I wanted to do with my
life, as a supportive friend and a colleague and counselor. We would play pool and golf and drink bourbon and Cokes together and mock and needle one another and basically have a great time. As I sat there thinking about all of this, I started to wonder what would happen if my dad died. I started wondering who would I play golf with and pool with and watch sports with. Who would talk shit about school and girls and life with me? What was going to happen to my dad, who was really my best friend? As all these thoughts raced through my mind I started to panic. I wondered if my mom might be considering similar ideas. However, as I looked at her she seemed solid and unbreakable like a rock.

***

When we got over to the bed in the ER where my dad was lying down, he was conversing with a doctor while a nurse drew his blood in order to run some tests. He was already dressed in a hospital gown and he was connected to several machines. One of the machines seemed to be measuring his heart because it beat and listed a bunch of numbers that seemed to be constantly fluctuating, but in small degrees. He had an IV in his arm which was connected to a saline drip. Along with the several wires connected to my dad’s chest and arms and body were a couple of white hospital blankets. As we approached his bed, instantly I could tell that my father felt much better.

“How you doing, Chris? You look a little blue?” my father asked sitting up.

“Don’t worry, I’m going to be fine.”

“Yes, I know, Pops. You’re going to be fine. I’m just a little hung over,” I assured him, although I was still not entirely convinced. I was hoping he wouldn’t see through this, but of course he did.
“Yeah, well, still don’t worry. I’m going to be fine, just ask the doc,” my father reassured me again, turning his attention toward the doctor. It was amazing how quickly he had changed his disposition. Nearly an hour before he was clearly struggling with memory problems and his general attitude and tone was one of confusion and fear. Now he seemed to remember a lot more and he was extremely positive.

The ER was a madhouse, with doctors and nurses rushing by in different directions, some dressed in smocks and scrubs and some more traditionally in white jackets and stethoscopes. Beds were being wheeled from one place to another and every once in a while an announcement for a doctor or nurse would be blasted over the intercom. By this point my mom had promptly asked the doctor what was happening and how he was doing. The doctor explained that they gave him an IV in the ambulance and that seemed to help. His blood sugar was probably low from working out and the IV helped restore his body. He still hadn’t recovered all his memory, but he was doing much better and was much more lucid. The doctor explained that they had run several tests and thus far the results were all positive. They had ruled out a heart attack and he explained that they would be running a CAT scan along with several other tests to see what had happened. The doctor told us to be patient and they would figure it out. He assured us my father was in good hands and, that if we needed anything, to ask a nurse. Then he showed us where some plastic portable orange chairs which normally linked together were so that we could sit by my dad.

As we sat there and talked, the three of us, my father regained more of his memory. Every so often a nurse dressed in her green sterile hospital scrubs and rubber gloves would come by and check on us. The longer we sat there, the more he seemed to
be acting like himself. By this point my dad was able to answer most of the questions when an hour or two before he could hardly answer any questions. Clearly he was improving and we were all hoping that he would be fine. As well as answering questions, my dad was also regaining his sense of humor. He kept asking the nurses and doctors if he could have a hamburger, and when they explained he couldn’t eat until they ran all their tests, he would tell them that the food service was atrocious in this place. When his doctor came over to see how he was doing, and explain that they still hadn’t found anything, my dad told him that his hamburger was surely burnt by now, and that he wanted to see a manager. At first the doctor was a little surprised by this, and I could see him wondering how to reply. However, when my dad could no longer hold a straight face and finally smirked, the doctor realized he was joking and said it was pretty funny and a good sign.

Normally this type of behavior from my dad would have embarrassed me a little, but in this tricky situation it had a way of reassuring me. It showed me that even though most of the time I am embarrassed by this, the fact he was going back to his old ways and joking around and being sarcastic was a good sign and he might just be fine.

As the time progressed we waited quietly and calmly to find out the results of my father’s tests. The dizzying feeling of everything rushing by and crazily going on around you had turned very frustrating especially in combination with the lack of privacy you get in the Emergency Room. We sat there most of the day waiting, but still we had not seen or heard from the doctor. My mom assured me that if it were something serious we surely would have heard something by now, and thus we figured it was a good sign we hadn’t heard anything. But still it was nerve wracking. It was never-ending. I never
experienced or remembered anything like it. All day we sat on pins and needles. It was awkward and long. Very long. My father still hadn't eaten anything and thus his jokes had turned to complaining and grumbling. My mom was still strong as could be and I could tell she was going to make it. But still the waiting was unbearable. Doctors dressed in their white coats or scrubs kept walking by, but our doctor was nowhere in sight, missing in action. I wanted to go up the front desk and demand to see him right away. I wanted to question the nurse and him right there in front of everybody. But instead, I decided to keep my cool. I figured that I was probably overreacting, but I just wanted to know what had happened.

***

When I was around six-years-old my dad took me golfing for the first time. Both of us loved sports and in a way we were both sports junkies. Growing up, he always encouraged me to play as many sports as I could and he even coached several of my teams. At the age of six I already played soccer, baseball, well actually T-ball to be exact, and a little basketball. I had never played golf at all, but my dad was a golfing nut. He played all the time, and when he wasn’t playing, he was talking about it or watching it on T.V. One sunny afternoon my dad came home after his regular Sunday morning golf game and told me he had some exciting news for me.

“Chris, how would you like to play a little golf with Dad today?” he asked very enthusiastically. Before I could reply he continued. “This morning we were walking to our second shot on the third hole when Rick Lamb found a broken seven iron in the trees along the out of bounds line on the left side. The club isn’t the best, but if we cut it
down so it’s the right size for you, and re-grip it, then it should work well for your first club. What do you think? Do you want to go play some golf with Dad later?”

Being that my dad’s number one passion in life had always been golf, when I was given the chance to play with him, I quickly agreed. Later on that day we went down to our country club, which was only about a mile away, and talked to the pro. He looked at it, agreed it could be a good first club and then he had me grip it like I was preparing to hit a shot. He marked where my arms naturally hung. Then he went in back with a big saw that was designed to cut steel golf shafts and came back around ten minutes later with the club, now adjusted to my size with a brand new cord grip on it. He wished me luck and then told me to have fun.

It was a sunny afternoon but there was only about an hour before it got dark so there weren’t many people on the course. On the first tee my dad showed me how to grip the club and how to swing.

“Don’t step into it. It’s not baseball. Remember to keep your eye on the ball and always keep your head down.”

Then he stood back and let me go after one. At first I missed it, but on my second try I hit the ball up into the air about thirty yards in front of us. I was ecstatic. I was speechless. I was golfing. I was now a golfer. My dad was also impressed and told me I was a natural.

Then he prepared to hit his shot. He stood behind it for a few seconds throwing some grass up in the air to check the wind. There was a mild breeze behind us, but it wasn’t that hard. He stood back there for a long time with a funny staring look on his face like he was trying to remember something very old from childhood. His eyes
were scrunched like he was looking into the sun and his forehead was slightly wrinkled in deep thought and I remember wondering what he was waiting for and what was taking so long. Then, finally, he approached the ball. He gripped the club like he had just shown me and then he pulled the club back and smacked one, making a distinct popping or clicking noise with much more force and volume than my shot had. I tried to watch the ball as it soared off the clubface, but it went so far that I couldn’t keep track of it and lost it as flew miles down the fairway. I remember not knowing how to respond and being speechless and my dad telling me that one day I would hit it farther than him and one day I would be better than him. I remember finding that hard to believe, but I was excited just the same.

We only played a few holes that afternoon, but my dad was patient and excited. He would give me instructions from time to time and in general he was happy with how I played and behaved. On the drive home I remember my dad explaining that maybe every once in a while I could go with him on Saturday and Sunday mornings when he played his regular game and drop a ball here and there and hit some shots. I, of course, agreed enthusiastically, partly because I had always hoped this day would come and now it had. Deep down I think part of me had always wanted my dad’s approval when it came to manly activities like sports and the fact that he would take me out with all his friends and let me play golf with him and all the men really said something to me. It said he did approve of me and was pleased with my game and behavior and he also wanted to do more together. It was now set. I was going to play golf with my dad occasionally on Saturday and Sunday mornings and for years after that we would always
share our love of golf together. It was a passion of both of ours now and it would be for a long time.

***

Finally after hours and hours of waiting my dad’s doctor came over.

“Well, Mr. Cullen, I have all the results from your tests,” the doctor explained in a calm, relaxed style. My mom sat up a little and eagerly waited. My father became quiet and I could tell he was nervous. I, too, was nervous, but the nice reassuring thing was that the doctor didn’t seem to be nervous at all. He stood there, his stethoscope almost falling off his neck, looking over a clipboard with files attached to it, which I assumed contained all of the results. “Everything seems to be all right,” he clearly began. “Your CT Scan, your EKG and your blood work all turned out normal. We ruled out a stroke and everything seems to be just fine. What we’re pretty sure happened is since you woke up and immediately worked out for a couple hours before eating or drinking anything, and since you hadn’t eaten for approximately ten hours or so before, your blood sugar got too low and that caused the attack. It’s called a hyperglycemic attack.”

The doctor explained that it was somewhat normal and was not overly serious. He said it would not cause him any future problems, but he had to be more careful regulating his eating and work out schedule. He gave him a few health suggestions and then he explained he was going to release my dad, but that he should take it easy for the rest of the day and it would probably be a good idea to take a couple days off from working out. The doctor told my dad to be careful and watch for the signs in his system.
Then he told him to go get something to eat, with a huge smirk painted across his face, almost chuckling, and to feel better.

Before he left, the doctor shook all our hands one by one. My dad turned to me and again was sarcastic.

“See, Chrisy, I told you I would be fine. Didn’t I tell you your father’s always right?” he said with a goofy, baiting smile plastered across his face. I smiled back at him first loving and then sharply and as I stared at him I could see a look of relief on his face. It was a look my mom also shared and I am pretty sure if I could have seen my own face I too would have worn the look of relief. Regardless, I knew I felt relieved and that was good enough for me.

A few days later we all went back to work and resumed our normal activities. A couple weeks after that, we ended up going to downtown Sacramento, early in the morning of course, like we had planned on this day, to go shopping for wedding clothes. My dad was more careful when he worked out, but in general our lives remained the same. At the end of summer my sister ended up getting married and I eventually went to grad school. Rick, the neighbor who came over to offer support that day, found it easy to go back to ignoring us. He rarely waved, and if I hadn’t experienced it first hand, I never would have believed he even offered support in the first place. However, in the end, life ended up going on as normal.

***

As I look back at the event now, not much has changed for my dad, but a lot has changed for me. In this situation I was forced to be a man and handle it seriously and
maturely. When my grandpa had gotten sick a few years earlier this was also the case, but this time it felt differently. Like when my grandpa had gotten sick, I had my mom to rely on for support, but this time I wasn’t the same scared adolescent college kid, and my mom relied as much on me as I did on her. This was sort of the case with my grandpa, but my role was more evident and clearly developed this time around. I had taken control and handled myself well. I know knew that I could handle difficult situations even under the most complicated circumstances.

The whole scare taught me about needing or trying to get approval from parents. When I first decided to go to grad school I think part of it was because that’s what my parents had wanted. I still wanted to go, but how much of that was my choice and how much of that was because they wanted me to go is unclear. I still ended up going to grad school and I am very glad I did. However, that doesn’t mean this event didn’t change the way I view big decisions like that one. After this I realized that the choices I made would dictate my future and that it is important that those decisions are what I want. It is important to me to realize that it is my life and I have to be happy and content, with or without my parents.

Before this event, I had never really considered losing my father or my best friend. I never considered that he could get ill and might die. I never questioned either one of my parents’ health and I never questioned anything in regards to my parents’ lives. After this I openly confronted it all. I confronted my dad was overweight, that he wasn’t in the best shape, that he ate poorly and didn’t take the best care of himself. I confronted that he might not see me get married, have kids or become a real writer. I accepted that some day he would die, whether I liked it or not. So would my mom and so would my
sister and some day my number will be up as well. I can no longer hide behind my age or how close my father and I were or are. This is my life, and even though we are still really close, I have to live it for myself.
CHAPTER II

IN THERE SOMEWHERE

The sun was just going down on a beautiful fall evening as the four of us drove in my dad's Mustang convertible with the top down, our hair dancing in the wind. My sister and I were both still pretty young and we were all going to our country club in Danville for a special family dinner with my grandparents. It was the end of September and thus it was still nice outside. It was no longer hot, but it wasn't cold either. There was a slight breeze, but it wasn't a crisp wind. We were all dressed nicely, my sister and my mom wearing dresses, and my dad and I wearing suits and ties. On Friday nights the club would open up the dining room to members. There was good food, a bar, a band, and a dance floor. We all met up in front of the club just before dinner. On Friday nights there was valet parking and when we arrived my dad slipped the valet a $20 bill for a tip. He had the bill folded up in his hand and he shook hands with the valet and passed over the money. It was a clever move that was easy to miss if you weren't paying attention.

A few moments later my grandparents arrived in their cranberry red Mercury Marquis, a car that was big enough to hold an entire soccer team. It was a distinct car that grabbed your attention. In a way it was a typical one for grandparents: big, ugly, and a sign of old-fashioned class and taste. My dad used to call it the Big Boat, which was actually a fitting name because it looked like a barge. When my grandpa got out of the car, he told the valet where to park and to be careful with it, but did not tip like my father
had. In fact, he didn’t tip him at all. We all said our hellos and hugged and then we went inside.

***

My grandparents and my father had had a complicated relationship, and my dad had a hard time including his parents in his life. My grandparents always showed my sister and me they loved us unconditionally. They took us to the park and to the movies. We would go to their house and play games and they would always have something fun for us to do. My grandma would often watch golf and other sports with me even though she rarely watched sports at all. My grandpa used to watch football with me even though he disliked the game, while my sister and grandma played dress up and went swimming. We had sleep-overs and went fishing and spent a lot of time together. If my sister or I were sick, we would go over there while my mom and dad worked and they would take care of us all day. Before any fun though, my grandparents always made sure we did our homework and if we had any problems they would help. My grandparents clearly loved us and they showed us as much as possible.

When my dad was around it was a different story. They would often argue, which normally led to fighting. Then it would be weeks or months until I saw them again. Despite their issues, my father allowed his parents to be with us, but normally my mom set it up. He tried to be social with his parents, but he had a hard time being with them. When we went over to their apartment he would often pace back and forth, which was always a sign that he was a little frustrated by something, and he would avoid getting into serious conversations or debates about politics, religion or being good parents. When they
would bring up one of these controversial topics he would quickly change the subject, and if they kept going back to them he would sigh and leave the room. He did everything he could to stay neutral and avoid fighting, but most of the time it didn't work. On this occasion my dad and my grandparents put all their issues aside and enjoyed each other's company.

***

After we greeted each other, my dad stopped at the front counter to let the hostess know we were there and then we all made our way to the bar. My dad ordered some drinks, a typical move when around his parents, while the rest of the family sat down at the corner table.

After conversing for a little while my dad arrived carrying his drink followed by a waiter with everyone else's. We all chatted and then a server came over and showed us to our dinner table.

***

What stands out the most about this night was that everybody got along fairly well. My dad and his parents were social and they pretended they had a good relationship, even though that was hardly the case. We talked about my father's work and about the club. My grandparents wanted to hear about school and what we were studying. They were always really supportive of my sister's and my education. I remember our school was pretty close to their apartment back then, and we used to go over there after school sometimes. They always encouraged us to try our hardest and they explained how
important an education was. This is interesting to me now because neither one of them had a lot of schooling, but they were both very smart people.

***

After conversing for a while, my dad asked for everyone’s attention and then he made a toast.

“I know that we don’t always get along the best, but it's nice that we are all here together celebrating each other’s company. I love all of you, even though we often disagree. I’m glad we're all able to share dinner together. So I ask that we all raise our glasses and toast to being here together as a family. To family,” my dad exclaimed.

We all raised our glasses and then everyone took a drink. That moment resonated with me for a long time. I remember thinking about it many times through the years. I remember thinking that despite all their issues deep down my dad does love his parents and this just goes to show it. Their relationship was rather complicated and hard to understand, but even despite all that, here he was making an effort, trying to create some kind of bond. I have always respected him for that, even though I’ve never told him.

We sat and talked for a while and then our server came over and took our order. Afterwards, while we waited, the band began to play. My grandma never danced, but I remember her dancing with me on this occasion. I remember the band playing “Mack the Knife,” one of my favorite songs at that time, and my grandma shuffling around the table and over to my chair. I remember her sticking out her wrinkled arm and asking me if I would give her the pleasure of dancing with her grandson. I agreed, stood up and she led by the arm over to the band. The dance floor was fairly big and not many
people were out there yet. My grandma wrapped one arm around my back and we held hands with the other. Slowly, we began to move to the rhythm of the song. I had danced a little before, but not much. We didn’t dance to anything fast, mostly slow songs, but it was still fun. I remember thinking she smelled like a mix of baby powder and moth balls at one point, but I decided to keep that comment to myself. I stepped on her feet a few times and she laughed. I remember being a little embarrassed, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Don’t worry about it. One day your future wife will whip you into shape and the girls will be lining up to dance with you. You’ll see,” she said chuckling.

While I danced with my grandma, my sister danced with my grandpa while my parents sat and watched. Everyone seemed to be enjoying each other’s company.

***

A couple years earlier my sister and I were watching T.V. in our house while my grandparents and parents talked downstairs. It was my dad’s birthday, but mine was just three days earlier so we had a family party together. My sister and I were sick of the adult conversation, so we went to watch Robin Hood upstairs. After we left, my parents started explaining to my grandparents that some behavior and comments were inappropriate in front of the children. Both my grandparents would often say things like, "You can never trust coloreds or Jews. They always lie and they're cheap!" They would constantly use racist and derogatory terms whenever they could. My dad told his parents he loved them, but they cannot act this way in front of the children. At first my grandparents were not pleased with this, but they didn’t jump at it right away. However,
after a few minutes my grandma started stepping out of line. She told my dad that children are supposed to respect their parents and that she hopes his kids, her grandkids, have more respect. My dad fired back that he wasn’t a kid and that respect is something you earn. My grandma didn’t hear this or care, mainly because she kept attacking and rambling on and wasn’t listening to anybody else. My grandpa backed her up, but for the most part was fairly quiet. It normally worked out that way. My grandma would almost always start the fights and my grandpa would support her even though he sometimes disagreed. He came from a time when no matter how bad your marriage was, you never got divorced and you swallowed your pride and did your best to get along. Also, if he had voiced opposition my grandma would have leveled him and would have never let him forget it. Slowly the arguing turned to yelling. My grandma kept saying things like “how can you raise a family in this household,” and “some kind of parents you guys are.” My father didn’t like this perspective so he got louder. Things got louder and even louder downstairs, but my sister and I continued to watch our movie. Finally, it got so loud that we couldn’t hear the T.V. All across the house, and the block for that matter, you could hear my dad yelling and my grandma yelling back.

When I asked my parents about this years later, they said they weren’t trying to cause a fight or an argument. They explained they loved my grandparents and they told them that, but they had to draw the line somewhere, they had to make a stand. Kids are impressionable and they didn’t want us mimicking their behavior. We never did, but they knew if was better to be safe than sorry. Anyway, they tried to handle it the best they could, but they ended up fighting just the same.
The argument continued for about ten minutes with my grandparents screaming, yelling and shouting. At one point my grandma even told my mom that this was none of her business and to stay out of it! My mom explained to me that my grandma loved to run all over her in those days, but when it came to the kids my mom didn’t allow this and was more vocal. They fought and yelled and screamed until finally my grandma called my mom a home-wrecker and then my grandparents left heatedly. They slammed the door when they left and they sped away noisily down the block. My grandma often made wild unjustified claims like this, attacking my mom for no apparent reason. These claims were far from rational and normally were directed at hurting my mother any way she could.

This is how my grandma operated. She made so many comments that were so cold and mean, I wonder how we ever got along in those days. She never accepted my mom and often put her down. She felt my dad could have done better and she often told all of us this. She would tell my sister and me that my mom wasn’t good enough for us or her son. She kept pushing her and pushing her and wouldn’t let up.

I remember one time my grandparents were driving us home after we spent the day with them, and my grandma turned around in her seat so she could address us face to face.

“If your parents ever get a divorce, I don’t want you guys to worry. Papa and I will make sure we get custody and not your mom,” my grandma explained like it was a known fact. Again, this was unwarranted and completely out of the blue. My parents loved each other and they had a very strong marriage. I could never, in my wildest dreams, picture them even considering a divorce. And even if they had, my grandparents
never would have gotten custody and my mom never would have lost it. But here was my grandma suggesting it like it was going to happen any day now. I don't why she would bring something like this up, but this wasn't the only time.

This cruel behavior happened a lot when we were younger. It was difficult to deal with, but as she did it more, it was easier to ignore. I was a little young to understand why she disliked my mom so much. I wasn't sure if I should defend my mom or stay out of it. I wasn't sure if I should ignore it or take it personally. She wasn't saying anything bad or mean to me, but at the same time she was abusing my mom and that still concerned me. I didn't want anybody messing with my mom. I remember being both hurt by these comments and mad at her for behaving in such a way. I didn't understand where this hate for my mom came from. My sister and I rarely, if ever, discussed this behavior. However, I'm not sure if this was because it was easier to ignore it or if we were just too young to understand it. Either way we never discussed it.

As I look back it infuriates me much more now than it did then. Even though it was an argument, my grandma had no right making such mean, hurtful comments. My mom had always been a great, supportive mom and she always treated my grandparents with respect and even love. She always included them in our lives and she treated them like her own parents, despite their cruel, biased sentiment in return. Yet the fact that my grandparents, and mainly my grandma, would attack her in such a heartless manner in front of her children really says a lot. I don’t care what the circumstance, to call a mother a home-wrecker in front of her two small children is cruel and unforgivable. Now that I have grown up, I feel this even more. If it had only happened this one time, I might have been able to dismiss it as something regrettable that sometimes happens in an argument.
Unfortunately, she conveyed similar statements and feelings many times during my childhood.

As I think about this all, it is even more interesting now. Several years after her death my grandma’s sister, Auntie Lilly, sent my parents one of her old letters. The letter was written right after my parents got married in Los Angeles in 1975. In the letter my grandma talked about how wonderful, smart, beautiful, and caring my mother was. She said my dad was lucky and she felt honored to have my mom as a daughter-in-law. She went on and on, bragging about how wonderful everything was and how great and amazing my mom was. She never said anything close to that to anybody inside our family, but outside of it, it turns out, she actually bragged about my mom quite often. My grandma had always been incredibly insecure, especially with my mother, and this points to that even more. I’m not exactly sure why my grandma was so insecure, but I have a few ideas. My grandma was an immigrant from Germany who did not speak English as a first language and I have to assume that she internalized that. I never heard her speak German, and her English was very good, but still it must have had some impact. Also, my grandma was uneducated and came from an uneducated family and my mom was well-educated and came from an extremely educated family. Another factor was religion. My grandma had a hatred for Catholics, and my mom was a practicing Catholic. Finally, my grandma always felt like my mom stole her only son. Still, it is very interesting that despite all her nasty and cruel treatment, she truly respected and admired my mother. Even so, these cruel statements were still terribly wrong.
My dad had a hard-enough relationship with his parents and this continual turmoil only worsened it. My grandparents and parents were both furious that night, and my sister and I had very little clue why.

A couple days later my parents sent my grandparents a letter detailing what type of behavior was inappropriate in front of the children and what type of behavior was all right. The called the letter the Ten Commandments, although only amongst the two of them, and even though I never read it, I heard about it in great detail to the point I almost could have read it. In this letter they were nice and compassionate and they also explained how important it was for my sister and me to have loving grandparents. The letter also addressed my grandparents’, and mainly my grandma’s, treatment of my mother. My dad knew at some point if this nasty behavior continued he might have to make a choice between his parents and his own family and there was really no question at all which he was going to choose. Both my parents said they loved my grandparents and wanted them in our lives, but their comments and behavior had to change. They sent the letter and a few days went by and they still hadn’t gotten a response. They waited and waited, but still nothing happened. Finally about a week later they ran into a friend in the real estate business who was also my grandparents’ broker. They started chatting about work, family and business and then at one point their friend let it slip out that my grandparents would be moving out of their apartment and back to Michigan.

My parents were totally shocked by this and they decided to settle the dispute. “I called and told them this is unnecessary,” my father explained to me years later. “I told them they didn’t need to leave. I told them I wasn’t asking them to leave. I told them I loved them and I was just asking them to change how they do business some.”
My father explained that he told them that they weren’t trying to force their hand and they definitely didn’t want them to move, but they did want to lay down some simple ground rules. They also explained to my grandparents that if they did anything that offended them or they didn’t like, they would change their behavior as well. This didn’t seem to change anything. The two packed their bags and moved away.

“No. no. It didn’t matter. They were moving. They were going to show us,” he continued to explain. “I remember feeling if you’re gonna leave, you’re gonna leave. That’s your business. You’re not breaking my heart.”

Both my sister and I were unaware of my parents’ actions and I remember feeling pretty hurt and I’m pretty sure my sister felt the same way. After all, my grandparents were abandoning my sister and me as well, and I wasn’t sure what we did to make them mad. I guess part of me knew they weren’t mad at us, but it still hurt that they would be moving away. As I think about the situation now, I realize that their moving was just their way of winning the fight, but I still feel pretty hurt by it. Was the fight that important? Did it mean enough for them to move away from their only family, and in particular their only grandchildren? I know the fight was between the adults, but it still affected the grandchildren, and thus, I felt they acted pretty selfishly. In the end, no matter what the excuse, it still hurt. It was one of those events that makes you question how you really feel about your grandparents and their relationship with you and your parents. It was an event that had a significant impact on my life and it is something I will never forget.

About a year later my grandparents got lonely and apologized to my parents and asked if they could move back. It wasn’t totally unexpected and my parents told them
they didn’t ask them to move in the first place and of course they would be welcome if they came back to California. For the past couple of months my grandparents had been asking more and more about my sister and me and even wanted my parents to tape record us so they could hear us talking and having fun. Knowing it was probably coming at some point my parents discussed them moving back a little amongst themselves. My dad felt strongly that he had no problem with them moving back, but he wasn’t making the effort to invite them himself. They were his parents and our grandparents after all, and despite everything, deep down he did love them. My grandparents called and asked and my dad told them they were welcome. That was how their relationship was. They would fight a lot and then my grandparents would apologize and my dad would let them back into our lives. My dad loved his parents, but he hated them too.

My grandpa had a drinking problem and when he fell off the wagon he was completely out of control. He wasn’t always drinking, but occasionally, normally once a month, he would start up and wouldn’t stop until he was completely drunk and wild. This was mainly before my sister and I were born, but it happened pretty regularly. He would become belligerent and would act violently. He was always under immense pressure, but that is no excuse. He was a top executive at Ford and he was the only executive without a high school diploma let alone a college degree. He was the head of safety for the Detroit plant and he had a lot of responsibility, which also meant a lot of pressure and stress. In part because of this, like clockwork, once a month he would get violently drunk. He would throw dishes, the stereo system, furniture, books and anything else he could get his hands on across the house. He would break picture frames and would scream and yell and belittle my grandma and every once in a while he would hit her.
Those were my worst nightmares,” my father told me. He said that he was only about sixteen and he and his mom were both truly scared. “I had to step in the middle to provoke him so he wouldn’t go after her. Even though I had issues with my mom, I was also very protective of her, especially in these situations.” My father told me that my grandpa would turn into a crazy man and would fly off the handle.

My father has one story that takes place on Thanksgiving when he was about twelve-years-old.

“It was a cold, possibly snowy, Detroit morning,” my dad explained. “I was excited because of the holiday and because we were seeing family later on.” At around eleven o’clock they got home from church, my dad energetic and lively. They were planning on going to my grandma’s sister’s house, my dad’s aunt, at around one o’clock and watching the Detroit Lions game and spending the day together eating turkey. As soon as they got home my grandpa started drinking excessively, mainly cheap vodka, his signature drink. My grandpa was drunk before they were even ready to go. Something started between my grandparents but my dad was not exactly sure what. Rather than all of them going to his aunt’s house, my grandparents dropped off my dad and told him they would come over later. Somewhere during the course of the day my grandpa and grandma got into one of their arguments. My grandma wasn’t always completely innocent in these battles. She would attack my grandpa verbally and would talk down to him and tell him how stupid he was. This is no excuse for my grandpa’s behavior, but it does help explain the situation a little better. They started fighting and slowly my grandpa got worse and worse. Finally, he became belligerent and out of control. They fought all day long and later in the evening when most families are enjoying each other’s company
and eating turkey my grandma arrived by herself and announced they were going to get divorced. My dad wasn’t sure how to react to this, but being that he was only a small boy and an only child, he took it pretty hard.

“It was the worst day of my life. It was the worst moment I ever remember experiencing,” he said to me. A few days later they made up and things went back to normal. A month later it would start all over again. My dad would often tell us no matter how much he loved his dad, he could never forgive him. Of course this was much later, when we were old enough to understand. In those days all we knew was that my dad had had a tough childhood.

Now as I look back, it is hard for me to picture my grandpa acting so violently. The grandpa I knew would have never acted this way. True, he had said some cruel, mean things and I had watched him act horribly toward my grandma, telling her how stupid and weak she was, but I never saw him get violent. He would get mad, but I never saw him raise a hand or hit anybody or anything or become destructive. The grandpa I knew and remembered loved all of us despite his occasional statements and behavior. He never really got out of line in front of us and thus I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for my dad. How do you handle something like this when you have no one else to turn to? When you’re an only child and your mom is verbally abusing your dad and your dad is reacting violently and sometimes even hitting her in response, what do you do? I would think you would consider running away or locking yourself in your room. I would think it would create trust issues. I would think over time you might even grow to hate both of your parents for this and might never be able to forgive them, which my dad has confirmed many times through the years he has trouble doing.
Besides not being able to forgive his parents, I don’t know exactly how he felt and thus I all I can do is speculate. Either way, I never saw anything like this first hand, and part of me has a hard time picturing it. I know part of this is because I really don’t want to believe these stories. I know part of me doesn’t want them to be true, but in the end I know they are. In the end, I trust my dad completely. This type of behavior is unforgivable and I don’t blame my dad for feeling this way about his parents. In fact, I am not sure if I could forgive this type of behavior either, even though I never witnessed it or experienced it. Regardless, treating anybody this way is unwarranted and unjustifiable, whether I had witnessed it or not.

Growing up I heard stories of grandpa even getting out of line in front of my mother. One time both sides of my family were in Tahoe for my parents’ anniversary and my grandpa started drinking early in the morning while making chili. By 10:00 a.m. he was already drunk. He started throwing jars and trash and left over ingredients around and carrying on and then he started in on my grandma, nagging her and once again belittling her. Although she might not have been able to stop this behavior, instead she made it worse. She followed him from room to room baiting him. My mother had heard stories like this one from my dad before, but she had never witnessed it first hand. My grandpa started verbally attacking my grandma. Slowly he got more and more angry until finally he started going crazy. He started breaking everything in the kitchen without any reason or excuse. He started throwing glasses across the room. They would fly through the air and then crash into the wall, little pieces of glass flying everywhere.

At one point he screamed at my grandma, “You’re dumb and stupid. You sat on your fat ass for forty years living off of me.” At first my mom thought about stepping
in, but my dad knew better and made her go downstairs with him because he knew they would be much safer down there. It wasn’t that my dad didn’t want my grandpa to stop, because he did, but he also knew too well from experience that if anybody got in the middle of their fight, my grandpa would only get worse.

Finally, after an hour or two of fighting, my grandpa got so drunk he could hardly stand up. But still that didn’t stop him. He climbed into his car and demanded that my grandma get in as well. My dad stepped in and wouldn’t let her drive with him when he was that drunk and wild. My grandpa got very angry because of this and left without her. He drove down the mountain, probably swerving, nearly out of control, and somehow managed to drive a couple hours back to the Bay Area. The next day my parents helped my grandma get a flight back as well and that was the end of it all.

Regardless, the event was pretty eye-opening for my mother. I’ve heard her say several times that she was truly scared that day. After this my mom was also familiar with my grandpa’s horrible wrath.

I don’t remember any of this, but from what I have heard about the event I am pretty upset with my grandpa. How can you treat family members in such a cruel way? How can you behave that badly? I am pretty sure most of this behavior stems from my grandma and her treatment toward my grandpa. She gave him no breathing room whatsoever. She pushed him and pushed him and pushed him. His opinion was always wrong and stupid, and a lot of the time she would cut him off before he even offered an opinion. He was always secondary to herself, and she always treated him like he was worthless. She called my dad Little Jim and my grandpa Big Jim, but in a mean and cruel way. She had to be in control, even if that meant cutting him off at the knees, which
oftentimes it did. She had to be right. She had to be in charge. She suffocated him. A gain, this doesn’t excuse his behavior, but it does make the situation a little clearer.

My grandma created a feeling of inadequacy between her and my father. She made him feel like he could never please her. When he went to play basketball or sports with his friends she subtly hinted at wanting a daughter because a daughter would stay and play with her and take care of her. When he got older and went to camps she would hint at the same thing because he didn’t write enough cards, checking in on her. It was always about what he wasn’t doing and not what he was doing. Neither one of my grandparents ever used the word “love” with my dad. This didn’t mean my grandma was heartless and never tried. She would still take him to camp and to the golf course and would still try to be a good parent. My grandpa still took my dad fishing and hunting, but it was all very complicated.

Decades later, when my dad had a daughter, their relationship changed some. My grandma still made my dad feel inadequate and still had her guilt trips, but they were less about pleasing and waiting on her, and more about her son’s lack of respect toward his parents. She wanted someone to worship her and tell her how wonderful she was, but her behavior made this impossible. As she got older she started talking about how she would die soon and how my dad would be sorry then, an excuse to make him feel guilty. When I asked my dad about her years after her death, he explained that she was just incredibly insecure.

“She was always negative and the glass was always half empty, not half full,” he would explain. He said he tried to love her, but she made it so difficult and almost impossible. Their relationship was complicated and much of my childhood contains these
crazy dysfunctional family stories. I am not sure where I fit into the whole dysfunctional family thing, but I am definitely in there somewhere.

Years after both of their deaths, while sitting in my apartment in Chico on a foggy, rainy Saturday afternoon, my father explained how he felt about the whole situation. My grandma died first and right afterward my grandpa stopped drinking and worked day and night for the next six years to repair things with my dad and to be the best grandparent he could be for both my sister and me. When he was diagnosed with liver cancer and only given a month or two to live, my father received counseling with hospice and he dealt with a lot of their issues.

“I have more empathy for my mom than I do for my dad,” he explained staying pretty strong while holding my mother’s hand. “As parents, they were both pretty lousy. I learned all my parenting skills by not doing it like them. However, in the end, I was able to forgive James when he was dying. I will always be furious at him and I will never forget any of this, but I was able to forgive him. I was never given that chance with my mom and because of that I never forgave her.”

***

Unlike his parents, my dad worked hard to create a strong bond. He really took an active role in my life and my sister's. I remember one time my dad got into a heated argument with some of his best friends in order to support me. Twice a week my dad played golf with four or five of his really good buddies. They played really early and for a decent amount of money, but it was a social, friendly game. Sometimes my dad would let me come and hit a shot here and there and drive the golf cart. His friends never
seemed to have a problem with this from what I could tell. One Saturday I came with him, but the group was already pretty full. There were six golfers, including myself.

“Since the course limit is five per group and we have six I have an idea. How about Chris drives the cart, and if we are ahead of the group behind us, he will hit some shots, but only if we are ahead of the group behind us,” my dad suggested to his friends while they gathered around to discuss it.

“Well, it is not really fair that Chris takes up a spot. After all, he isn’t betting, so why should he take someone else’s spot,” my dad’s friend Billy demanded, looking at everyone else for approval, but avoiding making eye contact with me or my dad.

“But he is not taking up a spot. Did you listen to my idea? He is going to drive the cart and hit a couple shots if we are ahead of the group behind us,” my dad argued, staring Billy in the face.

I was a little embarrassed and upset by this point, but I did everything I could not to show it. I didn’t want to put my dad in a tough spot. I didn’t want to inconvenience anybody. If I knew it was such a big deal I wouldn’t have come. I always thought they had no problem with me playing with them. They never said anything before and most the time they were nice and encouraging. They would give me hints and show me how to hit shots better. I knew golf was an adult game, but my dad was always excited to play with me and they always seemed fine with the idea. Now I felt like disappearing. I didn’t want to be there. I had knots in my stomach. I was totally embarrassed.

“Well, since Chris isn’t old enough to bet in the group and join the game, I don’t think he is old enough to play in the group,” Billy replied this time, looking my dad in the face.
I guess it didn’t seem to matter that I had played with them at least two dozen times before this. Or maybe they had been convinced to oust me for a while and this was just their chance. Regardless, either way, it was enough for my dad.

“Well, if that’s how you feel about it, fine. But I don’t think I want to play in this group today or ever again if my son is not allowed to play. We’re all friends here, but that needs to extend to my family as well. Family has to stick together. It is clearly stronger than friendship is,” my dad replied staring at everybody one-by-one with a more abbreviated stare reserved for Billy and my dad’s friend Rick.

This was a tough thing for my dad to do. Rick had worked for him for several years and the two were constantly doing each other favors. My dad hung out with Rick all the time and they had a strong friendship. They had played golf together for years and Rick had even bought a membership at the club so the two could continue to play. My dad went on golf trips with Rick and when they traveled, they often stayed together, either renting houses or in the same hotel. Rick really let my dad down and he took it personally. My dad didn’t play with the group that day and for a few years after that. One day his friends apologized and he accepted. He eventually became friends with Rick again, but their friendship was never really the same or as strong.

On that day it was clear to me that I was more important to my dad than golf with his friends. I was more important to my dad than anything around him or in his life. I was his son. He has been really supportive in this way my entire life. If I had a dream or an ambition that he disagreed with like becoming an English major instead of a business major or wanting to become a journalist, he would still support me. He loved me
unconditionally. He always used to tell me that no matter what his relationship with his parents was, we would have a strong bond forever.

***

My grandparents never treated my sister or me poorly, but there was always drama when it came to my parents and grandparents. My grandparents used to try to be the best grandparents they could be. My grandma loved playing card games so when we came over we almost always played cards. We didn’t play complicated games, normally Go Fish or Uno, but we always played and we always had fun. I remember one time they took us to an Oakland A’s game when we both fairly young. Both of my grandparents were not big sports fans, but both my sister and I were so they automatically took an interest when we were around. I don’t remember who the A’s played that day or even if they won, but I remember my grandpa asking questions and cheering and really getting into the game. Whenever someone came by selling peanuts or ice cream or sodas, my grandpa would always buy us something.

My grandparents tried as hard as they could to be good grandparents. They clearly tried harder the second time around. My parents still often fought with them, but we tried to stay neutral. That was why this night was so nice, everyone got along.

***

We all danced and laughed and had a good time at the country club. My grandpa and I both had our favorite entrée and we enjoyed it a lot as usual. We ate dinner and laughed and enjoyed each other’s company. We danced some before dinner and some after and my father even danced with his mother. It was unusually social. I saw a side of
my dad I had never seen before. Normally he was gruff and impatient when around his parents, but on this night he enjoyed their company.

After a long time the night finally wound down. We all got our coats while my grandpa paid the bill. When we got outside, the valet went to get our cars and we said our good-byes. I told my grandparents I loved them and gave them both a hug. My dad gave both his parents a hug and told them that he also loved them and to drive safely. His parents were a little surprised and seemed to be at a loss for words. They told him they felt the same and the night ended with everyone going his or her separate ways.

After this, my sister and I would still go to my grandparents’ apartment and spend time with them and my mom normally picked us up. When my dad picked us up there was often a fight. However, no matter what happened after that I would always remember and always knew that beyond all the baggage between my dad and his parents, they loved each other and they always would.
CHAPTER III

MULLIGAN

As I stood on the gusty, windy tee of the eighteenth hole, actually the ninth hole but my eighteenth, I was pretty much out of it. I figured I needed to make birdie to have any chance at all and even that was a stretch. My back was against the wall. This was it. Normally it took a round at even par or better to qualify for a tournament like this, and I was nine over. Because of this, I was pretty sure that even birdie might not be good enough. I had to go for it, but even so my score probably wouldn’t stand up.

The ninth hole was a two hundred yard par three with a large creek surrounding the green, especially where the pin was tucked in the corner. There was a strong crosswind that cut right through you. It was a dry wind and it wasn’t that it was particularly cold, but rather so strong it was like a freight train knocking you down. My hat had blown off several times during the course of the round and my lips were dry and cracking. I threw some fresh cut grass up in the air to see which direction it was blowing. All day long the wind had been swirling and changing directions like a mouse caught in a maze and this was again the case. Originally my game plan was to play conservatively and hit it in the middle of the green. That way I could two putt for my par and move on to the next hole. The only problem was there was no next hole. This was it. No more. All or nothing.
Good players always have game plans so they don’t wastefully play aggressively at the wrong time. They pick and choose where the best places are to play aggressively and on the other holes they play for pars. This is what separates the real greats from the wannabes. Making the wrong decision on a difficult hole like this can end any chance you have, resulting in a high score and frustrating golf round. However in my mind, without a birdie, I was already out of it. I was through. Done. Gone. There was no chance. This is why I figured I might as well play aggressively. My dad, who was caddying for me, argued the other side. He paced back and forth like he normally did when he was frustrated by what I was doing but didn’t want to argue, and did his best to convince me he was right. He pulled out the club he wanted me to hit, a three iron, and tried to give it to me before I even asked him for a club. He insisted I play conservatively. He also assumed I was out of it, but his argument was that it was good experience for the future.

“It is a good time to learn something,” he argued while clutching the three iron like it was going to fall out of his hands. “It’s good experience. Don’t hit the two iron at the flag!”

As I thought out the decision, all I could hear was my dad saying it was a good time to play the way the greats do. I had all the skill in the world, but without the right maturity and head on your shoulders that doesn’t mean a thing in the golfing world. You have to play smart at the right times and aggressively at the others. This is what my dad kept saying over and over again as we waited for the group in front of us to finish up. Being the young, aggressive and sometimes stupid kid, I disagreed, and that is why I pulled out a two iron and aimed for the flag.
There is something about the morning of a major state tournament that puts a funny feeling in the air. Everyone is a little nervous, but the greats hide it well. They tell dirty jokes and stories of former tournaments and it’s clear when you walk down onto the range who is an elite and who is trying desperately to get into the circle and into the ranks. This day was the qualifying tournament for the California State Amateur Championship at Fountaingrove Golf and Athletic Club in Santa Rosa, California. The State Am is the biggest amateur tournament in California and is held for an entire week at Pebble Beach. Everyone except for the previous year’s champion and runner-up must qualify at a local site to make it into the tournament. If you were lucky enough and good enough to win the tournament, instant local fame would follow.

I had just finished my junior year of high school at one of the best golf schools in the state, and I was used to hanging out with all the young guns. Friends of mine had gone on to play golf at some of the best college programs in the country, so playing with great players was nothing new for me. However, this experience was a little different because it wasn’t just the young greats that I was playing against, but many of the older, more refined greats as well.

California is a big state and there are an uncountable number of good players, but when it comes to the best players in the state, it is a small and well-earned circle. Former college All-Americans, some current All-Americans, state champions, former pros and very occasionally a few high school players make their way into the ranks. Like any sport, golf is an almost impossible future career and about ninety-five percent of those who attempt to turn pro normally give up after a few years and go onto more
profitable and a little less enjoyable professions. The nice thing for amateurs, depending on your point of view, is that these great golfers don’t give up the game when they change career paths, but rather, turn from pro golf to amateur golf. Golf is one of those sports you can play until you’re old and grey and many do. California has a rich golfing history with famous players like Tiger Woods, Johnny Miller, Nancy Lopez, Ken Venturi, Mark O'Meara, Corey Pavin, Juli Inkster, Craig Stadler, Gene Littler, Phil Michelson, and countless others who began their careers here playing these great and competitive state amateur tournaments.

I grew up surrounded by this circle of local greats and even though most walk right by these people at restaurants and the mall, in the golfing community they are local celebrities. I grew up on the golf course playing every day with my dad and friends and caddying for the local greats, not necessarily state-wide greats, but truly unbelievable players nevertheless. These players provided me with a view of what golf can be, and are responsible for my early schooling on the golf course. I learned through caddying how to play for big money under immense pressure where everyone is watching and only the winners get recognition. Some of these greats were former college players and current college players and occasionally here and there a few young pros struggling to succeed joined the game. In those days we lived in Danville, California, and I caddied for two former club champions, Tom Whitelaw and Sandy Stutter, who were both profitable career men, but who had played college golf and earned their respect on the golf course the hard way, by winning and playing well under a lot of pressure.
As I arrived at the Fountaingrove Golf Course I saw a large group of well-known players joking while they hit balls on the range. There was a small gathering of people, all loyal golf fans, who had come out to watch some of the state’s best tackle this difficult course in a highly stressful atmosphere. I checked into the clubhouse, got my tee time and grabbed a snack.

My dad was caddying for me and that was both a good thing and a bad thing. On the course my dad knew me best and knew how to keep me calm and clear. He had played with me more than anyone, and he knew my strengths and weaknesses almost better than I did. Nobody knows your game better than you do, but a large part of golf is maturity. Young players tend to want to play aggressively, pulling out the driver on every hole. When things go badly, more mature golfers know how to keep their cool and stay in control. Younger golfers tend to get upset and let their emotions dictate their decisions. This is a huge mistake. A golf round is a trying experience for anyone, never mind in this setting, and staying rational and clear is essential. One bad hole can lead to bad decision-making, which can end any hope of winning or doing well in the tournament, especially on a difficult course like this one. This is why you rarely see young nineteen or twenty-year-olds winning pro tournaments. In fact, you hardly see them on tour at all. Even Tiger Woods had some troubles when he was young. Therefore, having some maturity on the bag is a huge asset. In this way my dad caddying for me was an advantage.

The problem was that when you caddy for anyone, the Golden Rule is that the player has the final say and makes the decisions. You can give input and help make those decisions, but the player decides and it is your job to align yourself with their decisions.
and work together for the best outcome. When your father, the person who raised you and sometimes tells you what to do, is looping for you, this can be a problem. Sometimes he will disagree, and, being a parent, he has a hard time keeping it to himself. In the past, we had many fights on the course in similar situations. It wasn’t always as a caddy and a player, but we often had different opinions about how I should play and prepare, which often led to fighting. We were both aware of this problem going in, but we were both going to do our best to avoid a similar situation.

***

Because of my dad’s distinct presence, he commands a lot of respect. He is a successful businessman and a solid golfer, not necessarily as good as me, but still very good. We were pretty close and did a lot together on and off the golf course. In fact, around this time we started calling each other best friends and father and son. True, he was my dad, and he did often punish me for those crazy things children do, but on the course I wasn’t intimidated at all. We had been playing together since I was around six, and I had been beating him for quite a while. Although we normally enjoyed playing together, we often ended up fighting. My dad believed in my skill and ability, but he wanted me to act more maturely and use my head on the course more. He thought I played too aggressively, and he was constantly annoyed because he didn’t feel like I listened to him. At this point in my life, I was convinced I was going to go pro, and my dad felt like it was his duty to help prepare me.
My dad carried my sticks down to the range and found a spot for me while I finished up in the clubhouse. I stretched for a while and then I started warming up. On great golf courses, mainly the rich private ones, you don’t have to pay for range balls. When you get to an open spot on the range there is an arrangement of balls in a perfectly configured pyramid shape, and the balls are all in perfect condition. It is the ultimate sign of a great course and a great tournament. I began by hitting easy shots, normally just full wedge shots and slowly I worked my way into the more difficult ones. As I began to warm up, I started in on the more skillful shots, like purposely hitting a fade or draw, and the difficult punch shots you hit when you get in trouble. Finally, I started working on my woods. In competitive golf there is no such thing as a mulligan. A mulligan is a golf term used in friendly games, meaning that if a player hits a bad shot they can re-hit the shot again for no penalty. However, it is not an official golf term or practice. This is not to say most people don’t hit mulligans, but in competitive golf, where following every rule is essential, a mulligan has no place. You never see pros go back to their bag for another ball after they hit a bad shot because there are no do-overs in tournament golf. Because of this, it is essential to be prepared to hit your first shot well. Normally I ended by hitting the club and shot I would be trying to hit on the first hole to prepare for this, which again I did in this situation.

A little while later my name and tee time was called and my round began. Sometimes in big tournaments players tee off both the 1st and 10th tees so that everyone finishes at around the same time and because of this I was teeing off the tenth hole. In major tournaments the starter on the first tee loudly introduces the player before he or she
tees off and normally those gathered around all turn and pay attention to the golfer on the tee. When I was called I was a little nervous. I had a nauseous feeling in my stomach that just wouldn’t go away, but I was also very excited. There were quite a few people standing around watching and this added to my nerves. I had practiced the shot I was going to hit on the range, a hard driver with a little draw, and was preparing to hit the shot again. I pulled out my driver and put the ball on a tee. Then I stood back, cleared my mind and visualized the shot I was preparing to hit.

As I stood over the ball I started thinking about everybody watching and how it would be nice to rip one down the center. I started to hear a bird singing in the trees, a sound I had completely blocked out until now. I could smell the fresh cut grass and it brought back memories of playing as a young child. I started thinking about how the people would react to my shot. I started thinking about how this would be the perfect start to my day. This could set up the round I wanted to post.

It’s bad when thoughts like these creep into your mind when you are addressing the ball. It is an indication that your mind is wandering, and it’s a good time to step back and rethink the shot you want to hit. Luckily, I did notice this and I stepped back and refocused. I visualized the shot again and then addressed the ball. This time my mind was clear. The ball clicked when it hit the sweet spot of the club and I could feel a nice tingling sensation all though my arms and body. It jumped off the clubface with force and authority and soared down the middle of the fairway whistling, a ball on a mission to its target.

With that one shot everything changed. My nerves slowly started to settle as people cheered, and I realized this was just the start of a long round. As I walked down
the hill, my mind was clear and I began a conversation about sports with my dad so that I could stay relaxed. Sports was normally a safe topic with Pops, being that we both loved sports and we both normally agreed. Because of this, we talked a lot about sports all day long.

***

My dad did everything he could to be a good father. My sister and dad shared a lot together, but for the two of us our common ground was sports. I loved all sports and was a sports fanatic. I watched and played every sport I could and talked about sports nonstop. My dad was the same way. He also loved all sports and he was incredibly competitive, so sports fit perfectly with his personality. My dad was always good about encouraging me as an athlete, as well as sharing sports with me. He was involved in every sport I played, and when I was around six years old we started playing golf together. As I got older I focused more and more on golf and eventually quit the other sports I played, but my dad and I never lost our shared love for competitive sports.

This was just the base of our relationship. He truly loved both of his children with all his heart and he did everything he could to show this. I don’t know why, maybe it’s boys vs. girls, but my dad and I always shared something my sister and Dad did not. We were father and son, guys, and friends. We could joke and tease and be men together. We would play basketball together. We would watch sports together. He would take me golfing with all his friends, and I would not only get to play, but hear all the dirty jokes and swearing. I was one of the guys, a member of the group.
I remember on Wednesday nights my dad had a regular dice and poker game, and any time he could convince my mother to let me tag along with him, he would take me. I remember the first time he took me we sat at the bar and slowly he explained all the dice games to me. There was Boss, Ship Captain Crew and Liars. Technically, I was too young to sit at the bar, but my dad and I were both good friends with the bartender so when it wasn’t that busy he would look the other way. As my dad and I started practicing the games, slowly his friends started showing up. They were all extremely nice to me and treated me as an equal and a member of the club, even though I was much younger than all of them. When everyone had arrived we sat around a big table and played Liars together. They played for a dollar a game, meaning each player would have to throw a dollar in the pot and the winner would take it all. My dad and the others let me join in and my dad covered all my losses. When I won, my dad would take the money, but he told me it was as good as credit, so when I wanted a new golf glove or some balls or equipment he would pay for it and take it off the money he supposedly owed me. When it came to poker I just watched, but this was mainly because I didn’t know all the games and you could lose a lot more money.

Occasionally the two of us would go to our country club and have a Jacuzzi together and then afterward we would go sit at the bar and he would order a bourbon and coke or a scotch and I would order a root beer and we would tell stories and play dice and have fun being men and enjoying the activities men enjoy. As I got older and reached my teenage rebellion years we fought and argued more, but we never stopped being close and sharing time together.
***

I was one over par through five holes when I finally reached the sixth fairway, or more accurately the fifteenth fairway, but my sixth hole. There were large oak trees just right of the green and a crisp firm wind blowing from left to right. The oak trees bounced back and forth in the wind like pin balls and the leaves were littering the course with debris. Because of this I decided to hit a cut shot and ride the wind into the green and flag. Unfortunately, I hit what in the golfing community is called a double cross: when you hit the opposite shot of what you intended. I’d tried to cut it into the green, but instead I hit a draw into the trees and forest, leaving me in deep trouble.

When I walked down the hill towards the trees left of the green I kept telling myself to be patient and stay calm. There was plenty of golf to be played and I couldn’t win the tournament on this hole, but I sure could lose it. We searched for my ball for around five minutes looking behind trees and in bushes and basically scouring the earth until one of the other players in my group spotted it. It was deep in the trees resting against a big rock around the size of a basketball. When I approached it, I instantly realized this shot could end any chance of qualifying if I didn’t play smart and protect myself from making a big number on the hole. I grabbed the rules book out of my bag and started flipping through the pages. All great players know the rules of golf pretty well, but all carry the rules book just in case for big tournaments and situations like this one. I wanted to take an unplayable lie, but I couldn’t remember all my choices. Luckily for me, there was a rules official on the next tee. One of the other players in my group put down his bag, walked up the hill and called him down. When he approached my ball I could feel my heart racing and my palms were sweating and I knew I was nervous.
hadn’t done anything wrong, but it was an important situation and ruling and therefore I couldn’t help but get nervous.

A n unplayable lie is when you pick the ball up for a one stroke penalty and drop it in another spot. The official explained that I had three options: I could take two club lengths from the original spot no closer to the hole, I could go as far back between where the ball originally rested and the line of the flag, or I could go back to the spot where I hit the last shot and replay it for a one stroke penalty. Being that the other two options still left me in trouble this option made the most sense. I discussed it with my dad for a minute to make sure he agreed and then I walked back up the hill and dropped the ball where I had hit the last one. I checked the wind, cleared any visions of my previous shot and prepared to hit it again. I took a couple of deep breaths and tried to visualize it. I kept telling myself this was the right decision and to trust my instincts. Then I addressed the ball.

I stood over it for a long couple of seconds and then I pulled my club back and gave it my best. This time I hit the six iron very crisply with the little cut that I was planning on and it landed in the center of the green about twenty feet from the flag. I walked down the hill slowly to let my heart settle down. It was as if I just raced in the Indy 500 and my heart was still driving circles around the track. A drenaline fueled my body and it kept my heart pushing harder and faster, pedal to the floor. A s I took some deep breaths and tried to bring my heart back to neutral, I kept constantly reassuring myself this was a smart move and then, finally, I got back into the grind and into the zone.
I scrambled for a while, trying hard not to play myself out of the tournament, until I reached the seventeenth green, my eighth hole. I was left with a good lie but a difficult shot. There was a large bunker between my ball and the flag and the green ran away from the bunker towards a large lake about fifteen yards away. There was only about ten feet of green before the actual hole and it was going to take a high soft flop shot to get it close. Personally, I love this shot, but it is difficult to execute perfectly. My short game was the strongest part of my game, but this shot was risky and if I played it wrong it could end any chance I had. My dad wanted me to play conservatively again and make sure I didn’t make anything more than a bogey. He put down my bag forcefully and walked over to where he wanted me to hit it. He kept discussing how this was a bad time to play aggressively. I couldn’t help but disagree.

“Look, you made the right decision a few holes ago and you’re still in this thing,” my dad explained as he pointed out where he thought I should hit it. “Don’t waste it all here. There’s lots of golf to play, Chris, and you can make some birdies on other holes. Play smart,” he encouraged.

I couldn’t help but think about what one of the great players I used to caddy for named Sandy Stutter said about situations like this one. He said, “It’s all fine and good to play smart. You need to, to play well. But there comes a time where if you keep protecting that’s all you end up doing, protecting. Not playing!” He said when you got lemons you make lemonade. After thinking it out for a few minutes I agreed with my mentor and decided it was time to make lemonade. I walked around the green and decided where I wanted the ball to land. It was clear to my dad by this point I was going to do it my way and it was clear he disagreed. As I took a few practice swings my dad
paced back and forth. He took off his hat while shaking his head and pulled back his hair. Then he let out a loud sigh, clearly his way of letting me know he disagreed. I ignored this and kept focusing on the difficult shot I was going to hit. Then I addressed it, hit it crisply getting under the ball with some spin and hit the shot my dad was so worried about. The ball soared straight up in the air, landed about a foot ahead of where I wanted it to making a loud thud noise, took one bounce, spun and finished about two feet from the cup. My dad told me it was a great shot even though he disagreed with my choice and I made the par and rode the momentum for a few holes.

It was a big moment in the round and in our relationship. As far as the round, I turned a bad hole and tough shot into a good hole and a great shot. As far as we were concerned I might not always agree with my dad, but that didn’t always mean that I was wrong. It was a great shot that regenerated me and kept me going for a little while. If you got lemons you make lemonade, Stutter would say, and that was exactly what I did.

***

Stutter was a great golfer and a great mentor on the course. He taught me about keeping my cool and composure. He taught me about game plans and making the tough decisions. He taught me about good practice and about preparing for a round. He taught anything and everything you need to be a great competitive golfer. My dad was a good athlete, but not nearly as good a golfer as Stutter was when I was caddying for him or as good I was now. When it came to golf advice, Stutter provided me with something my dad could not.
However, when it came to real life I wanted my dad as a role model much more. He was a great, nice man who people always spoke highly of. Stutter was a good golfer, but was pretty full of himself and was quite arrogant. He had a horrible relationship with his own son and had a chip on his shoulder. Since he made a lot of money, he acted like he was better than most people. He was pretentious and cocky and all around pretty much a jackass. He had a way of ripping down everyone he saw as if they had some huge flaw that only he could see. He would say things like “Billy, he’s got a hole in his swing, never will amount to anything,” or “John, he’s a nobody. He works construction.” Because of this, on the course his advice was valuable, but off the course my dad is who I would turn to.

***

I coasted along for a while playing well, but also having trouble with the difficult conditions. On the fifth hole, my fourteenth, we ran into a rules official who was a good friend of my dad named Mike Schmidt. Mike was also a member of our country club in Danville and the two had known each other quite a while. My dad explained that he was caddying for me and that he was having a great time. Mike was impressed I was playing in the tournament and he wished me luck. I thanked him and then refocused on my round. Meanwhile my dad walked toward the green with Mike explaining about what had already taken place. The two joked around for a few minutes while we waited on the next tee and then finally Mike shook my father’s and my hand and wished us both luck again. He said this was a major tournament so just playing in it was a great honor.
I thanked him, but in my mind I disagreed. I didn’t come to this course just for the experience, I came here to qualify and possibly even win. I had played with great players in great tournaments before, so playing in another great tournament was not the reason I forked over the money to attempt to qualify. When you are eighteen most people are convinced you are too young to be a threat. Most figure you can hold your own, but few consider you to be the competition. In my mind that was exactly what I was, and I had come to this tournament with the goal of qualifying and that was exactly what I was planning on doing. True, I wasn’t in the best shape so far, but the round wasn’t over yet. I could still make a few birdies on my way in and post a number, a number that might just hold up. This is what I was set to do.

I played the last four holes a little more aggressively than I was planning on. This is not to say I played with my hair on fire, going for every aggressive shot I could and charging putts five feet by the cup. I had gotten to this place by playing my own game in my own style. I knew playing too aggressively and wildly would surely end my chances, so I was convinced I would still pick and choose my battles. I played hard, but I tried to play in control.

When we got to the green on the eighth hole I had a ten foot birdie putt and was the closest to the pin and therefore had to wait for everyone else to play before I could stroke my birdie putt. My dad was becoming a little impatient with my aggressive play, but he knew if kept bringing it up we would probably end up fighting. Instead, he would subtly remind me in his own way that I needed to protect par. He would talk about how important the next hole or shot was and how I want to avoid staying out of trouble. Or he would tell me how fast the green was and how I have to be careful not to run it by
too far. He would talk about how bumpy it was around the cup and how I wouldn’t want to have to make a big par putt with all those bumps. This time it was how fast the putt was, but even in his secret code I understood what he was getting at. I understood and agreed, but was again focused on making it. I knew he wanted the best for me just like he always wanted the best for me, but I wanted birdie.

As I stood over the ball I did my best to visualize it falling in the back of cup and then did my best to duplicate that vision. However, as I looked it over I kept thinking about what Stutter would say about big putts like this. He always used to tell me, “It’s all about speed and getting the ball to the hole. If you don’t get it there, it won’t fall, but if it’s too hard, you could three putt. It’s all about the speed,” he would say. This advice seemed a little more logical to me. It wasn’t like I wanted to three putt or hit it too hard, but I did want to make it.

Finally, after a few moments thinking it over I pulled the putter back and stroked the putt. It rolled toward the right center of the cup, hit the right lip, dipped in the hole about half way down and then spun out and sat on the lip. I stood there frustrated for a couple of seconds staring at the hole and then I slowly walked over and tapped in my par. This really ticked me off. I had hit a perfect putt and a bad break cost me a birdie. I couldn’t believe it. I needed that and luck kept it from falling in. This infuriated me even more and I was convinced I needed to birdie the last hole to have any chance. I was determined. I was a man on a mission. I would birdie the last hole, no matter what. I would do it and that was it.

When I finally reached the ninth hole, my eighteenth, I was nine over par and convinced I was going to make birdie. This was it. I discussed my options with my dad,
but no matter what he said or argued for, I stayed true to my own feeling that I needed to make a birdie to have any chance at all. It had all come down to this, all or nothing, and I was going to do it. He, obviously, completely disagreed. At this point we had no idea what the scores looked like. We had to rely completely on what scores had qualified in previous years, normally around even par or better which left me in deep trouble. The general rule in competitive golf is when you start focusing on a score and posting a certain number, that is when everything comes crumbling down. There is a cliché saying in golf about playing one shot at a time and staying in the present, not the future or past, and even though it is cliché, most of the time it is very true. But I wasn’t thinking about this. I was thinking about what kind of number it would take to qualify. I was thinking about the birdie I was going to make.

My dad kept pushing me to hit the safe shot in the middle of the green so I could protect par. He clutched the three iron he was hoping I would hit like it was going to fly out of his hands. He once again paced back and forth and sighed and did everything in his power, except actually fighting with me, to persuade me to listen to him and play smart. He argued that even if I did need to make birdie, I could still make a long putt if I hit the ball in the middle of the green.

I didn’t see it this way. I knew it was a difficult hole, but I also knew I needed a birdie and the best way to do that was get this shot close to the flag. In my mind there was no “if” about it. I needed birdie and I was going to make one. My dad could say whatever he wanted. It didn’t matter. I had seen the pros charge up the last hole and birdie it for the win and this was exactly what I was going to do. I was going to birdie the
last hole, and nobody could stop me. This is why, despite his strong objections, I pulled out my two iron and played aggressively.

The flag was tucked on a small peninsula surrounded by a creek on three sides. The wind was blowing from left to right at around twenty to thirty miles per hour, so I figured to get it close I would have to aim just right of the water and let the wind push the ball back to the flag. I took a long time thinking out how I wanted to hit it and visualizing the shot before I addressed the ball and gave it my best.

As I stood over it, my mind was clear and I was prepared, both mentally and physically, to put it close. Finally, after a few minutes, I hit the two iron very crisply and it soared up into the sky bouncing against the wind. Slowly it started drifting back toward the flag and I held my breath as it started to drop out of the sky. It seemed like an eternity as the ball slowly drifted toward the green. It started left of the flag, almost directly in the water, and was gradually coming back to the stick. As the ball came down it was left, but it appeared like it would end up around ten feet from the cup. I had ripped my two iron, hitting perfectly, and I still felt like this was the right club and shot.

However, to my surprise and dismay the ball flew right over the corner of the green where I thought it would end up, and instead of landing by the flag, it carried it all and flew directly into the water.

With one shot my heart dropped and I knew it was over. No charging up the last hole and making birdie for the win this time. I was through. Done. Finished. It was over and there was no going back. I sat there in disgust for a long few moments before I moved out of the way so the other players could hit. Everyone in my group all hit their balls on the green and I waited, clearly frustrated, while they did so before I could walk
down about one hundred yards and drop my ball for my next shot. I couldn’t get my huge mistake out of my mind and the worst thing was I knew my dad was right. I should have played smart and I didn’t. I was stupid and there was nothing I could do to change that.

After storming down the hill I dropped another ball and prepared to hit it again. As I approached it and set up I hadn’t really got the image of the last shot out of my brain and thus the ball followed the path of the first shot and flew right into the water again. I felt like picking up my clubs and walking in without finishing the last hole, but I knew this would look bad. I was so mad and at the same time heartbroken. How could it have gone down that way? I needed that shot and that birdie. How could this have happened? How could I have blown it this bad? I couldn’t get over it. I felt like having a nervous breakdown right there on the spot. Why did I have to be so stupid? Why didn’t I listen? After another couple minutes fuming and mumbling to myself, I dropped another ball and this time I hit the shot I wanted to.

I walked to the green like a defeated prize fighter hurting all over and unable to get past the hard beating I had just taken. I two putted for my four-over-par seven, thanked everybody in the group for the round and then walked up the hill with my dad, my heart in my stomach. I knew what he was thinking. I knew he was right and I knew he would take the chance to point that out. I knew it, but I was hoping it wouldn’t happen. My dad had a tendency to do this and even though these type of conversations really taught me a lot and helped me grow up, mature and get better, they often most always led to a fight. Luckily for the two of us he was smart enough to give me some time to cool down before we talked about my mistake.
As I reached the top of the hill I heard a few players talking about how difficult the course had played and that was why the numbers were so high, but I did my best not to listen. I was mentally exhausted and tried to block out everything that was happening around me. However, as we approached the scorer's table this gossip got louder and louder. Finally after signing my scorecard and turning it in I heard how high the scores actually were. The lowest round of the day was a five-over-par 77. Only two other people had broken eighty. There were still a few groups on the course, but at that point it looked like a score of ten-over-par 82 would qualify. This made me even more miserable. As it turned out my dad was actually right. Pretty much right on the number, in fact. We waited around for the last couple of groups to come in and when they did things changed a little. Five scores of nine-over-par 81 were tied for the last three spots in the tournament. This meant that after everything was made official they would have a sudden death playoff for those last three spots. If I had hit the ball in the middle of the green and two putted for par like my dad had wanted I would have been in that playoff, but the way I had played ended my chances. My stupid aggressive play had ended it all and there was no one to blame except for me. I had blown it and that was it.

***

This moment stuck with me for a long time after that. It was my recurring nightmare for years to come. No matter what I did, I couldn’t seem to get my huge mistake out of my mind. It was cemented in my memory and to this day it still is. Later on my dad and I had a conversation about my big mistake, and, despite arguing a little, in the end I agreed with my dad. However, that doesn’t mean that he still didn’t take it a
little too far. Even now, several years later, he still brings it up. However, in the end he was right. I was young and stubborn and I had played too aggressively. I should have listened and I didn’t. My dad wasn’t always right, even though most of the time he argued he was, but in this situation I should have listened and I didn’t. After this things pretty much continued like normal. My dad and I were still close and I still loved him and valued his opinion, at least when he presented it in the right manner. However, on the golf course I was still better and I didn’t always see eye-to-eye with him. That doesn’t mean I was always right, but it also means that I wasn’t always wrong.

I still love my dad, but I also have different opinions and different golfing mentors. When it comes to our life off the golf course we are still close and I still do value his opinion and love him unconditionally. We still fight, although not as much as we did then, and for several years I was still the typical teenager: rebellious, often stupid or ignorant and dying to declare my independence and show both my parents I was my own man. As I got older we both settled down some and we continued to do a lot together and share our love for sports. Things weren’t perfect, but I’m not sure they ever are. To this day my dad still continues to be a beacon of support and love in my life just as my mother does, but I am an adult now and nothing could ever change that. I am my own man and both of my parents know it.
CHAPTER IV

SAYING GOODBYE

My grandpa always showed an interest in my pursuit of journalism. When my parents moved to Napa just before my sophomore year of high school I was really interested in writing. I had an aunt who was in the journalism business and her husband was also a journalist who had just been nominated for a Pulitzer while working for the San Francisco Chronicle. Both my parents were strong writers and thus I was also interested in writing. I always struggled with math and science classes, but I always did well with writing and English classes.

When I started my new school I sat down with my mom and my counselor and he told me all about their journalism program. The journalism advisor had a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Berkeley and the newspaper was his pet project. It was a monthly paper and was much better than my last school’s newspaper. I was really interested in this field because of my family connections and thus I started writing for it right away and quickly grew to love it. After my first year in a new school and my first year working as a high school journalist, a position opened up at the Napa Valley Register, the local paper with a circulation of around 30,000 people. The job was in the sports department where they were looking for a high school intern to write simple summary pieces and to work on the scoreboard page.
I heard about the job from my advisor and he encouraged me to apply. I inquired about it and as it turned out the person hiring had also gone to my high school and occasionally in the past I had played golf with his father. In part because of this, I was offered the job. It was really exciting and I felt like a real journalist and not just a high school student. I pretended I was working at a big paper and that every day people got up and read my articles. In truth, I didn’t even get a byline at this point, but I pretended just the same.

It started out only a couple days a week, generally Friday and Saturday nights when deadline was a crunch, but after doing a good job for a little more than four months the Sports Editor sat me down and explained how they wanted to hire me as a part-time correspondent, or reporter. I would still work on the scoreboard and write the simple summary pieces on Friday and Saturday nights, but a couple other days a week they would give me my own events to cover, which I would write up and get a byline. The money wasn’t great, but the experience was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I relished in my success and I felt like I was an adult and a renowned writer.

I remember my first story was to cover a high school football game between my high school, Justin-Siena, and our rival St. Helena High. The game was in St. Helena and I was supposed to cover the game, get some quotes afterward, write up my story there, and call it in. I remember being nervous and wondering how to behave. As it turned out, there was also a reporter from the St. Helena Star, and I remember wondering if he looked down on me. I wondered if he knew I was in high school. I wondered if he thought I was serious. I wanted to look and act professionally, but I wasn’t sure exactly how to do this. Even worse, since it was my high school I was covering, I knew several
people there and wondered if they knew what I was doing. I stood on the sidelines on my high school’s side and watched the game and took notes. I had explained to the coach I would be covering the game earlier in the week and thus he was not surprised by my presence.

The game was progressing pretty normally. It was mostly a defensive game which meant most likely a boring story. However, at just about the end of the first quarter there was a serious injury. My high school had the ball pinned back pretty deep in their own territory and they were trying to make a drive and put some points on the board.

Suddenly, the starting quarterback, a sophomore, dropped back and was hit from behind by two large linemen. He dropped to his knees, but they continued to smother him. The bigger of the two guys hit him low and as a result his left femur snapped like a twig. He shrieked in pain. The femur is the largest bone in your body and thus it is hard to break. When it did, there was an unmistakable crunching, cracking noise that sent chills down my spine. I was standing about fifteen feet away and I saw the whole thing live in front of me. They immediately brought out the ambulance, and I watched as they checked him out and put him in the back. I remember that everyone in the stadium was silent. You could have heard a pin drop. The quarterback was screaming and wincing in pain and there was very little anybody could do. They rushed him to the hospital and then they brought out his back-up.

The game continued and at halftime I had my work cut out for me. I searched for the school’s principal and tried to get a quote and an update. The coach was talking to the team and trying to reassure them. I called my editor right away and let him know what was going on. Then I tried to grab the coach and ask him a few questions as he was
rushing back out onto the field. The game continued and in the end my high school miraculously ended up winning. I got all the information I needed after the game, wrote up the story, and called in it. The editor told me I did a great job in a tough position and that I should be very proud of myself.

The next morning my story was on the front page of the sports section and there was a headline mentioning it on the front of the whole paper. My copy had been edited some, but the feeling of seeing my name in print in such a prominent place for such a big story was a rush that is hard to describe. It was no longer like I was playing reporter; I was the real thing now. I was the same as my aunt and uncle, and even more, I now believed that this profession was wide open to me and I could go as far as I wanted to. I could be a great, renowned writer, and I could win awards and rub shoulders with the best in the business. In fact, I could be one of the best in the business. I know this was taking it to the extreme, but it was a great moment for me and had a way of showing me even though they might be a little far-fetched, my dreams were attainable.

After that they gave me more stories, mostly high school sports events, but I was still getting one to two bylines a week and my writing was quickly improving. As time went on they gave me more opportunities and I even got to accompany a couple of the reporters to some Giants and Raiders games and interview the pros in their locker rooms. I didn’t get a byline out of it, but the experience was something I will always remember.

My grandpa always used to ask about journalism and he even started a subscription with the Register so he could read my stories. He showed all his friends at
his assisted-living home, and when I came to visit his apartment or play pool in their
game room everybody would ask how it was going. It was like I was the local celebrity.

I remember one time I went over there to pick up my grandpa and bring him
back to dinner. I went into the lobby and one of his friends flagged me down and told me
he wanted to talk, putting his hand on my shoulder and pulling me over to the corner of
the lobby.

“Your grandpa’s been bragging to everyone about how you’re a real journalist
working at the Napa Valley Register. He’s been talking about you around the clock,” the
man told me in a lively, excited tone. “He said you’re writing a lot of sports stories. I just
wanted to let you know I think this is amazing. I was a big writer in my day too, and I
think it’s great that you’re doing this, especially since you’re still in high school. Anyway
I just wanted to let you know your grandpa’s very proud and he’s been talking about you
quite a bit. Congratulations and keep up the good work,” he said shaking my hand firmly.

I felt proud, not only because the man had heard about it and was impressed,
but also because my grandpa had been bragging about me. As time progressed more of
his friends would tell me about how my grandpa talked about it all the time, and a few of
his closer friends started looking for my bylines as well. He bragged whenever he got a
chance and he clearly showed me how important it was to him and what a great
opportunity it was.

As I got closer to college he started looking into the schools I was interested
in and researching their journalism programs. He didn’t put any pressure on me, but he
clearly proved he had a vested interest in my future, and that really meant a lot to him and
to me. He clearly supported me and showed he truly did love me and wanted the best for
me and again that went a long way. All of these events were strengthening our bond, and my grandpa was quickly becoming one of the most important persons in my life.

***

My father spent very little time with his parents. Their relationship was somewhat dysfunctional and because of this they rarely visited from their Florida retirement home and they hardly ever talked on the phone. However, when my sister was born, and then two years later when I was born, their relationship improved and eventually they moved from Florida to California to be closer to my family.

My grandparents were both highly involved in my sister’s and my life. They spoiled us a little and spent a lot of personal time with us. Despite her issues, my grandma did her best to show she loved us. She acted as a loving grandparent and did her best. Although she truly cared for both of us, my sister’s birth was kind of a dream come true for her. She still did not have a daughter, but she had the next best thing: a granddaughter. Because of this my grandma was always a little closer to my sister than to me. It wasn’t as if I was neglected or anything, but their bond was always a little stronger. However, also because of this, I think my relationship with my grandpa was a little stronger. Both my sister and I had strong bonds with both grandparents, just in different ways.

I guess this interesting dichotomy between my sister and grandma and my grandpa and me is why my grandpa’s death affected me much more than when my grandma died. My grandma passed away about six years before my grandpa, and despite the sadness, there was also a little relief from all the family. My grandma always talked
about how sick she was and how she was ready to go. She would often talk about dying, and closer to the end when she was on oxygen she would threaten to pull out the tubes and go quietly. She was obsessed. She would say things like, “I’ll be going any day now, so you better be nice to me,” or, “If you don’t show me more respect, I pull these cords right out and then you will regret it.” To put it mildly, she embraced death many years before she actually bid farewell.

My dad always had a hard time being around my grandparents, but when my grandma acted like this it was even worse. Most of the time he would get frustrated, pace back and forth, and either leave the room or change the subject. However, every once in a while he would tell her she was acting ridiculously and that it was not appropriate. My grandma looked at this as a sign to push this even further and before anybody knew it another fight about my dad’s lack of respect and love would start up. If the fight was bad, which oftentimes it was, my dad would yell back at her and even shout, “Go ahead and pull those cords right out.” This sounds harsh, but in reality my grandma didn’t even really need oxygen in the first place. Her doctor told her she could easily live without it and that it wasn’t needed to stay alive, but she wanted the oxygen, both as a sign that she was truly sick and we needed to respect and care for her and as a way of dangling it in front of my father’s face. I think my sister and I both understood this for the most part, mainly because my parents sat us down many times and explained it all, and therefore when she acted like this we didn’t get unnecessarily worried, but I know we both hated it when they all fought and therefore we hated when she said things like this.

However, because of this unfortunate outlook, I think it made it easier to say goodbye and let her go, believing that it was what she wanted and it was what was best.
My grandpa’s death and his outlook on life made his eventual passing much more
difficult and much more emotional. After my grandma passed my grandpa embraced life
with a revived energy and lived each day to the fullest. He quit drinking completely and
dedicated himself to being a better man. He did his best to repair his relationship with my
father and mother and really worked day and night, as hard as he could, to create a life
long bond with both his grandchildren. I know it was hard for my sister and parents when
he finally left, but part of me truly believes I took it the hardest.

***

After about three years of bonding together in Napa and enjoying some really
good family memories and experiences, the time came for me to go to college. Unlike my
sister who left a few years earlier for school in San Diego, I chose a college a little closer
to home so that I could visit every once in a while when I wanted. I chose to go to Chico
State, a public state school about two-and-a-half hours from Napa. Chico was a small
college community and they had a great journalism program. My grandpa did a lot of
research on the school and he was really glad about my choice. My parents were also
glad with my choice and that I had chosen to go to school fairly close to home and, most
importantly, I was happy with Chico. When the time came for me to say goodbye like my
sister had three years previously, I was just as sad as my grandpa was. Like my sister’s
departure we had a family farewell party where we exchanged stories like normal.
However as the night slowly wound down we all knew what was coming. After dinner
my grandpa gave me some money to help me move in.
“You know, Chris, we’re all gonna miss you around here. It just won’t be the same,” my grandpa explained with tears forming in his eyes. “Now I won’t have anything to read in the sports section. Anyway, you’re gonna do great things up there, we all know it. Good luck and stay out of trouble.”

He told me he would miss me and that I should come home and visit soon. My grandpa hardly ever hugged me or showed public affection, but this time he embraced me warmly and I could tell he was going to miss me. Like with my sister, he tried to be strong and show his undying support, but it was clear he was sad and that this move would make things a little tougher on him. He told me to “try my hardest up there,” and to continue with my golf and journalism. Then he said goodbye.

After dinner I drove my grandpa home and again he told me he would miss me, but that he also expected great things from me and he was glad I was becoming an adult. We shook hands one last time and then I dropped him off. I was just as sad as he was, but I knew if I got weepy it would only make things worse. I had always loved my grandpa, but the last few years we had gotten so close that I wasn’t sure what it would be like without him. I knew I would miss him quite a lot, in part because I already was even though I hadn’t even left yet.

That night as I packed, I slowly became nervous, a feeling I think all young people going to college feel and part of me wished I would be staying. Nonetheless, I packed my bags and the next day my parents drove me to Chico. The whole day I thought about my grandpa.
After a little more than a year in college, my grandpa’s health slowly started to deteriorate and because of this slowly things started to change. When I was little my grandpa was diagnosed with colon cancer. He received treatment and he was able to fully recover, but he was always more susceptible to other forms of cancer because of his previous condition. Midway through my second year at college he slowly started to change. My mom was the first to notice it, probably because she spent the most time with my grandpa. He was walking less and was less physical in general and his memory was much worse. He couldn’t remember names or family parties and he screwed up details more and more. This was alarming because my grandpa always had a sharp memory, and then out of the blue, he started losing it. My mom discussed it with his doctor and originally they agreed it was just dementia and that his behavior was just a sign of him growing older. However, when his memory quickly worsened, and his motor skills really started to deteriorate, the doctor decided it was time for a visit.

I remember coming home for Christmas vacation and having my grandpa over for our traditional Sunday night dinner. At this dinner my grandpa hardly stood up at all and his memory was visibly worse. His hair was uncombed and it looked as if he hadn’t showered in weeks. His clothes were dirty and they also looked like they had not been washed in a while. He was pale and uncoordinated. He forgot my sister’s name at one point, and when we told stories he mixed up all the names of our family members. He was confused about current events and he had trouble remembering stories that had taken place just months before. In general, his memory and mind were visibly shaken.
At the end of the night when it came time to take my grandpa back to his apartment, my mom accompanied me. Normally my grandpa entered his building through a side door which was just down the hall from his apartment. When we got there the door was closed and locked and the light was burnt out. Therefore we had to go through the front door. We got back in the car, turned around, and drove around to the front of the building. This normally wouldn’t have been a big deal, but because of my grandpa’s recent physical decline, I literally had to help my grandpa walk to his apartment. He could hardly stand on his own and he could hardly walk. He had to put his arms around my body while we walked through the front doors and down two different hallways to his apartment. He dragged his feet a little as I kept moving forward and they sounded like a pair of water-skis being dragged across the pavement, minus the metallic sound. I helped him in, and then after making sure he was all right we left him for the night.

I couldn’t believe it was happening. I couldn’t believe he was this bad. What happened to him? Why was acting so unusually? Was he dying? Was he sick? Was this permanent? He was fine and now he was horrible. I didn’t know how to act. I didn’t know what to think. My mind was rushing in a thousand directions at once and I couldn’t do anything to control it. I couldn’t do anything to control this situation. In the inside I was frantic. I didn’t want him to die. I didn’t want him to get sick. I loved this man. I had no clue how to handle it.

***

After I left home and started school at Chico State I saw my grandpa a lot less. The first semester I came home a lot to visit, normally at least once a month. However,
after that I came home less and less. I made a lot of friends and there was a new
independence in my life that I embraced. I could do what I wanted, when I wanted, and I
didn’t have to answer to anybody. I had decided not to play golf on Chico State’s team.
By the end of high school I was a little burnt out by all the competitiveness and I figured
it would be hard enough to move to a new town and start college for the first time, so I
decided to give competitive golf a break for a while. This didn’t mean I was giving it up,
but I would be taking vacation, so to speak. If I wanted to play the next year there was no
reason I couldn’t go out for the team and play then, but I would decide that when I felt
ready. Even though I was taking a break from playing competitively, I did play several of
the local courses with my friends regularly. Chico sits at the northern base of the foothills
of the Sierra Mountains and the public courses are hilly and a little different than what I
had been used to. It was nice to play golf for fun, and even though I missed the feeling of
playing competitively, I was still playing a lot and I still loved it.

After my first year I started working for the school newspaper, The Orion. It
won national awards every year and had a very impressive reputation. Again, I worked in
the sports department and was doing very well, writing at least one article a week.
Occasionally, when I did come home, I would bring some of my clippings for my
grandpa to read. I would still talk to him on the phone a little, but my home was no longer
in Napa, it was in Chico. This gave me a little more of my own identity and was
something that was truly mine and not something I shared with anybody else. However, I
know it was a little hard on my grandpa and therefore I felt a tiny bit guilty from time to
time. This was especially true when I came home for a visit and at the end of the
weekend I would have to say goodbye to my grandpa once again. Deep down, however, I think he understood I still loved him. I was just growing up.

***

The next day, a little before my grandpa’s doctors appointment, my mom asked if I was willing to go with the two of them to help my grandpa walk and get in and out of the car. My mom always went with my grandpa to his appointments, but this was the first time I went along. When we pulled up to my grandpa’s apartment, like the night before, I had to physically help him. We drove to his doctor’s office and when we got there I went inside to get a wheelchair. I brought it outside, helped my grandpa get into it, and pushed him into the outer offices.

Every time the phone rang and every time the receptionist greeted someone new my grandpa spoke up to answer questions as if they had been addressed to him.

I remember being pretty embarrassed about this, but also being pretty worried about how quickly his condition had appeared and worsened. As we walked down through the different outer offices to my grandpa’s doctor’s office, he continued this behavior answering questions and greetings that clearly were not directed at him.

As we waited outside his doctor’s office for a couple minutes, he started engaging in other people’s conversations, again assuming they were talking to him when clearly they were not. It was obvious he was not doing well. After a few minutes we were called in. His doctor asked my mother about his behavior and memory and then he asked my grandpa some direct questions.
“Well, Jim, do you know what today’s date is?” his doctor asked in a soft tone.

“Of course I do,” he replied quickly. “It is April 2nd, 1933.” In reality it was December, 2002.

Feeling uneasy, I avoided looking my grandpa in the eye or at anybody for that matter. My heart beat like a drum being wildly pounded at a college football game and my stomach was in knots. Drops of sweat slowly began to race down my forehead and my leg started shaking a little like I was listening to music, but it was almost silent, except inside my head. I was losing it and I wasn’t sure if anybody noticed or could tell. Before this got any worse I stood up abruptly, in the middle of the doctor asking my grandpa some questions and scribbling down the responses, and excused myself and quickly walked outside.

The appointment continued for around twenty-five minutes before my mom came out to let me know what was going on. The doctor agreed this was a serious situation that required close monitoring. He wanted my mother to take him to the hospital so they could check him in and monitor his behavior. He wanted to make sure my mom was able to do this and if she needed help, but she replied that I was with her and that I was willing to help wherever she needed. The doctor was pretty confident my grandpa was mixing up his medications, or not taking them at all and this was causing his memory loss and the decline of his motor skills, but he felt close monitoring was a very good idea.

I remember my mom constantly thanking me over and over again for all my help. Every time I replied that it was no problem and I wanted to help. Regardless, she
kept thanking me. It was clear to both of us by now we were dealing with all the difficult work in this situation.

After a couple of weeks in the hospital my grandpa did fully recover and his memory and physical problems returned to normal. It turned out he was not taking his medications, like the doctor suggested, and that he must take them regularly to avoid similar problems again. Even though he fully recovered, the situation was eye opening and it was clearly evident that my grandpa’s health was now something to pay close attention to.

A couple of months later, after moving into a more hands-on assisted living retirement home and getting settled, my grandpa developed a urinary tract infection and his unusual behavior returned. After the previous experience my mom immediately made an appointment with his doctor. They ran some tests and realized this was something new. He was still getting confused and his symptoms seemed similar, but this time it was not a medication problem. The doctor wanted us to keep a closer eye on him while he ran some tests.

I was back at school at this point, but my parents kept an eye on my grandpa and also kept my sister and me in the loop. My mom went to his apartment at least once a week and normally more than that and my dad would go with her every third trip or so. The doctor had already run several tests and still hadn’t found anything. However, he still felt like there were more tests to run.
At the beginning of my summer vacation we checked my grandpa back into the hospital. His memory was the worst it had been and he had almost no physical abilities. His first night there my mom and I decided that we would go down to see him. When we arrived he was being closely observed. He was happy to see me, but he wasn’t sure where I had been. He didn’t remember that I was in college and he remembered very little about the last few years. As we sat and talked with him his behavior and memory was quite peculiar.

“You know we’re lucky Edsel Ford is running things these days, otherwise the company would be in a lot of trouble,” he announced at one point, like we were in the middle of a conversation. Edsel Ford was Henry Ford’s son and he had died in 1943. My grandpa had been an executive at Ford for more than thirty years, but he had retired long ago. My grandpa continued talking about Edsel and about events that had taken place more than seventy years before. He talked about many of the great things Edsel had accomplished, but he talked about them as if they had just happened. My grandpa also kept telling my mom that I needed new underwear and that she should go out and get some right away. Again, I was unsure where this had come from, but we played along, and later, laughed about the whole thing.

Clearly my grandpa’s long-term memory was better than his short-term memory, but it was also clear he was visibly shaken up and very confused. He thought my sister was working for the San Francisco Chronicle even though she still lived in San Diego and had never worked in the journalism business. Like before, he wasn’t sure about the date and even though he was trying his best to act normal, he was clearly sick.
He was lying in his hospital bed with several blankets over him but he couldn’t stop shivering. He had a fever and in general he seemed pretty bad. We spent hours with him talking and trying to comfort him, but it didn’t seem to help.

***

My dad always had a hard time being around sick people and going to hospitals, especially when it was his own father he was visiting. I think a large part of this had to do with my grandma and how she always claimed she was dying. I think, deep down, that always scared my dad, even though he would never admit it. I think he always feared this would happen and so he avoided having to deal with the pain by avoiding situations like this one. His best friend had died years before and he had a hard time with that experience as well. I think hospitals scared him because they showed him just how vulnerable we all are and he didn’t want to confront that. He just didn’t and couldn’t deal with that, so on this trip it was just my mom and I. We hung out there for a very long time until finally we decided to go.

When we left I remember worrying that this might be the last time I get to see my grandpa. I remember trying to be strong for my mom, but I also remember being pretty broken up inside. Here was the man that I had formed such a close bond to the last few years lying helplessly in a hospital bed, clearly sick and confused and there was nothing I could do about it. I was very upset, but I remember putting on a tough exterior and trying my best to go on as if the situation was not that serious and that he would recover. I tried my hardest to be strong for my mom, but deep down I was not sure if I truly believed what I was saying or how I was acting. I think I knew he was going, but I
couldn’t put that on my mom. I couldn’t leave all the responsibility on her. I knew someone had to be strong and I knew that person had to be me. By putting on a tough exterior, she could do the same, and we could get through this together. We could do this, it was just going to be hard.

This was new role for me, being one of two people who was in control of the situation and having to be strong for everyone else in my family, and I think it helped me grow up and become an adult. It is never easy when anybody close to you is sick, never mind your own grandpa, and having to be the backbone in the situation taught me how to handle emotionally trying and difficult times and as a result I emerged as a much stronger, more mature person.

I’m pretty sure my mom was also very worried and was also having a difficult time with the situation. She had already lost one father and now she was embracing the idea of possibly losing another. However, like me, she also tried her best to be strong and put on a tough exterior. She was very positive, and that night when we reported back to my father, she tried her best to be optimistic. However, inside I think we were both very worried.

***

The next day when I woke up my parents were at the hospital with my grandpa. I remember trying to watch sports and go on as if everything was normal, but my mind and thoughts couldn’t get away from the idea that my grandpa was staring death in the face.
Around an hour after waking up my parents returned home. They had talked to his doctor and they now knew what was wrong with my grandpa. His doctor had found cancer in his liver and he was pretty sure that was causing the physical and memory symptoms. He didn’t have a lot of time left, but he probably wouldn’t go right away either. I remember being sad, but also being somewhat happy. I was not happy he had cancer or that he was dying, but I was happy that he wasn’t going to die right away, either. We didn’t have a lot of time left, but we had a couple of months and that was better than nothing.

***

In November I came home for Thanksgiving and saw my grandpa for the last time. He was out of the hospital and staying at his old apartment. He had a nurse coming in every couple of days to check on him and make sure everything was going alright. For the most part he lost most of his physical abilities, but his spirits were high. When I first came to see him he was very excited.

“Hey there, Chris, how’s Chico?” he asked with a smile on his face while trying to sit up in bed, but clearly struggling to do so. He looked really sick, his face and skin pale and his hair was long and hadn’t been cut in months. “Well, how’s journalism going? You writing a lot of stories?”

It just so happened that I had brought some stories with me and I handed them to him so he could look them over if he felt better. He thanked me, told me he was excited to see what I was writing, and then he continued with his questions.
“How’s golf going? You playing much?” he asked again, very interested in what was going on in my life. We talked about golf for a while and about sports in general. We talked about my classes and about politics. He was very interested in everything I had been involved in. After conversing for around a half hour my grandpa quickly became tired, so we left. I told my grandpa goodbye, gave him a hug and told him I see him on Thanksgiving. I remember he was much weaker than I had ever seen him before, but he was also very happy.

For Thanksgiving that year my sister’s boyfriend Brian and his family came to my house to visit along with my aunt, uncle and my two cousins. My grandpa was unable to travel and thus he was going to miss his first Thanksgiving dinner in ten years. We decided to visit him late in the day, but as usual my mom got extremely busy cooking and at four in the afternoon it wasn’t looking so probable. When dinner was finally served we all bowed our heads and thought about what we were thankful for and I couldn’t help but think about my grandpa. I was glad he was still alive and that I got this extra time with him, but I was also sad he wasn’t there sharing dinner with us. As we all ate and told stories, more and more I couldn’t help but think about my grandpa. We told some stories about him, but in the end it didn’t feel right not having him with us.

After dinner my mom called over to his apartment and it turned out he wasn’t doing so well so my dad, mom, aunt, little three-year-old cousin and I went to see him. The rest of the family stayed with Brian’s parents and sister while we went to his apartment. When we got there my grandpa could hardly sit up in bed and he was clearly confused. We talked for a short time and it was clear he wasn’t doing so well. My aunt
was great with my grandpa like always. She always was really good with him and this was no exception. She talked with him and joked and laughed.

***

The whole time I could feel myself starting to break down. I couldn’t believe it. This was the end and there was no going back. There was no more time. Time had run out and he was going to leave. How could this have happened? He had made his wrongs right and he had formed a stronger healthier relationship with all of us. He had completely changed his personality and I knew how much we all meant to him. How could he go now? It didn’t seem fair. It didn’t seem right. I knew he was going to go someday, but why did it have to be now? Why couldn’t we have just a little more time? He had made such a huge impact on us all since moving to Napa and it was all coming to an end. No more family dinners. No more stories from Canada. No more conversations about journalism. No more watching golf on Sunday afternoons. No more talking about politics. No more Papa. Life as we knew it was changing and no matter what we did it wasn’t stopping. My body started to shake and I could feel my legs getting weak. Tears had formed in my eyes and I didn’t know how much longer I could hold it in. I knew he was going soon and there was nothing I could do. He was weak and helpless and all he wanted was to share this moment with us and I couldn’t without losing it in front of him. I didn’t want him to see me this way, but I was having a hard time keeping it in.
“Hey, Chris, Annika’s getting a little antsy. How about you two go outside and find something fun to do while we stay with Papa,” my mom suggested, seeing I was having a difficult time and was starting to become emotional.

Again, not wanting to lose it in front of my grandpa I did exactly that. When we got outside my cousin wanted to ride the elevator downstairs so I held her hand and we walked over and pushed the button. The elevator opened up and the two of us got inside. We hit the button to the bottom floor and her face lit up. In the inside I was breaking down, and my sweet innocent little cousin was having the time of her life. When we got to the bottom she wanted to go back up and stop on every floor. A gain, we stepped back in and I hit all the buttons because she was not tall enough to reach them. She started laughing hysterically. I was heartbroken, but the look on her face was making me feel a little better. My grandpa was dying, but my cousin was here and we were sharing this special moment together. We stopped on every floor and as the people saw us she waved and yelled “Happy Thanksgiving!” Of course when we got to my grandpa’s floor she wanted to do it again. Part of me felt I should be with my grandpa, but I wasn’t sure I could handle it. Besides, I was having fun with my little cousin and I was laughing and smiling for the first time all day and it felt kind of nice. I hit the button for the elevator again, and when it opened back up we continued this routine. She was having more fun than a child at a birthday party, and I think because of that, I was having fun and was able to let go a little.

Finally, after a long time my mom came over to the elevator and said we were leaving. I came back to my grandpa’s room gave him a big hug and told him I loved him.
He had tears in his eyes as he returned the sentiment. He always had a hard time saying he loved anyone, but this time he did not hold back. When I embraced him with a hug as I was leaving, I didn’t want to let go. When we got home we told stories of the trip and my little cousin sat in my lap and told everybody about our adventure. It was a hard time, but nice to share with family.

***

About a week and half later while back at school my dad called me one Saturday morning in December and told me that they were pretty sure Papa was going to die that day. He hadn’t passed yet, but it wasn’t long. I had a hard time talking back, but I did and said okay and to keep me posted.

Sure enough about an hour later my mom called me with the news that my grandpa had in fact passed away and that we were all sorry and sad to see him go.

I took it pretty hard. I remember crying for hours and wondering why he had to go. I remember avoiding my friends completely for around a week. They called me many times, and when I didn’t return their calls, they started calling my roommate. I had been avoiding him too, but at least he knew why. He explained to my friends what had happened and why I was so out of touch.

Finally one day my best friend came over to see what was going on. I explained what had happened and then despite trying to hold it in and act tough, I completely broke down in front of him. We were talking about sports and the holidays and then I just burst out crying for no apparent reason. My face turned red as a stop sign, and he was unsure what to do. At first he got up and tried to give me a hug, but he wasn’t
sure if this was the right response and sat back down. It was awkward for him and for me, but he tried to show his support and be there for me. He told me it was sad, but that life goes on and that my grandpa is probably in a better place. I remember trying to listen and agree, but I just couldn’t. Part of me was furious at everybody and everything, and part of me was completely distraught. I was sad he was gone, but mad he left. I knew he couldn’t control it, but that did not make it feel any better. He was gone and he would not be coming back.

I remember wondering why it had taken so long for us all to come together again and love each other and why he had to change all that. I remember being mad at him for all the less than happy times and wondering why he couldn’t have made a bigger effort earlier in life. I remember trying to study and focus on school, but I just couldn’t get away from his death. Day and night, all I could think about was that my grandpa was gone and he wasn’t coming back. He left us and there nothing I could do about it. I loved this man, but why did he have to wait so long to show that he loved us all too? Why did he have to wait so long to stop drinking and change his behavior? Why did he have to go when things were finally getting better? I was a complete mess. Part angry and part heart broken I was just not myself.

After a little time and a lot of crying I was able to get over it and think of the warm memories and how much I loved my grandpa, but he was still gone and would never be coming back.

Now I cherish these last few years in Napa and all the great times we had, but I am still to this day sad he is gone. During major events in my life, like when I graduated from college and when my sister Jamie and her boyfriend Brian got married, I always
remember my grandpa and think about how much these events would have pleased him and how he would have loved to be there. Every once in a while I think of him and how much he loved me and wanted the best for me and my sister and I think it has finally given me strength. I think about how much he cared for my sister and me and how he wanted us to succeed and I think it always pushes me harder because that is what he would have wanted. This is not to say I am not working hard and chasing my dreams for myself, but it definitely gives me some perspective and helps me keep going, no matter how hard the task, because I know my grandpa will always be with me encouraging every step along the way. He might be physically gone, but he still lives in my memory and in my mind and I will never forget him. In the end it was a really difficult situation, but at least I got the last few years to spend some quality time with him and I will never forget that. I will never forget him.
WORKS CITED


