

Greg Walklin

At the Turn

“That’s it.”

The memory of his father’s words comes to him during the final round of the Nebraska State Amateur, at the turn, while Blaise is using the tip of the tee to clean out the grooves of his sand wedge. The sand of the ninth’s greenside bunker, from which he’d just managed to save par, was rocky and compressed. You didn’t have to rake because you didn’t leave footprints; it was the kind of place he liked, because you could leave no evidence that you’ve ever been there. Although Hill Hollow Country Club’s greens have a few dead spots and more than a few unrepaired ball marks, it’s generally in better condition than the fairways, which have burned out in the long summer drought. Even at a tournament, even at a shady country club with five-figure membership dues, they can’t avoid the heat. His playing partner, an arachnid Mormon from Provo, supposedly a relation of the Marriotts, a sharer in their ubiquitous wealth, was a member. A top junior player, he moved to Omaha a little more than a year ago, reasons unknown, perhaps to fuck up the hierarchy of Omaha prep golf. Despite his familiarity with the course, he’s two shots back of Blaise. The rest of the field is four shots behind him, which means it’s come down to pretty much just the two of them.

The memory, those first words, has Blaise standing in his home’s crabgrassy front yard, although surely it must have been the back. He’s aware he has not thought of this moment in a long time, despite how significant it now seems. It’s cool, and the dewy grass has been recently mowed. He has to choke up on the nine iron, tight but not too tight of a grip, his pinkies locked, left arm ramrod stiff, each swing taking the tips of the grass with it. Hips before the shoulders. His father looks on, gestures, and finally speaks, after all those years.

Why did he have to think about that now? The tenth tee is imposing: 225 yard carry over the hole’s kidney-shaped lake. From the clubhouse’s rear bar-centered colonnade, club members can recline and

drink and see, from a single spot, the tenth tee, lake, blue/white hard court tennis courts, and the pool. The sound carries well from there and from the pool, so the tenth tee is distractingly noisy. You can hear cocktail clinks and belly flops.

His father never spoke a word to him, not a single word. If Blaise called to him, which he did when he first learned to speak, his father would not answer; he would acknowledge the speech with a nod or a shake, but he offered not one syllable. If a message were terribly important, his father would indicate so with his hands, establishing a rough gesture system that mostly left Blaise deciphering the code. If all of life has to be deciphered, his father was the most difficult code to crack. While his mother spoke enough for all three of them, she would not speak of why his father would not talk to him. She held up her hands, raised her eyebrows, gestured, perorating with a sigh, but she would talk around it. She fondly told joke after joke, all coming from a well she'd dug as a lonely teen (jaw-broken, she'd spent months alone with joke books), and she accompanied them with card tricks, quarter tricks, games of all kinds, never stopping her talking. Talking was what she found for a career—trial work as an attorney.

When he was still a child, Blaise imagined this was the way all fathers were, giant masses of silence, measuring their sons through their actions, by the way they held themselves, by all of those things that, he was taught by the nuns, were more important than what you actually said. Fathers were actions, mothers were words. By the time he entered the second grade, he had given up on talking with his father but still pressed on talking *to* him, telling him about his day, apprising him of what magazine he was reading (Blaise took to reading magazines very early on and had many subscriptions) and generally informing his father more than he ever told his mother. This, he knew, hurt her, that he would be so insistent on expounding to the one who obviously didn't want to hear it.

The ball off the tee of the tenth flies too high. Blaise gets under it, takes it with the top of his driver, and it lands flat and dead, right-center of the fairway, fifty yards farther from the pin than he should be. Thankfully he still carries the water. He already knows the tenth's other main feature, an improbably ancient and strategically planted birch, will be blocking his approach, hanging over the fairway, defending the pin, and the green is lined with fat pothole bunkers. Second handicap hole, but into the wind it plays harder than the first. This final round has so far been conducted in silence. The arachnid Mormon, despite his rosy expression, is a son of a bitch to play against. Last year, he won the state amateur, his first time, by three strokes, right after the move, and he hadn't even unpacked the boxes yet. Blaise, playing in his second State Am, finished thirty-eighth. The year before it had been twenty-first.

Smiling during this shot, the Mormon puts it maybe fifteen feet, drawing it into the wind somehow, and leaving himself an uphill left-to-righter for birdie. Blaise, who feels his club slide out of his hands on his downswing, finds the sand. Again.

“Bad bounce,” the arachnid Mormon says. What motivated him to talk, finally, on the tenth fairway? Blaise wonders if this is only the foundation of chats to come—the Mormon has seemed on the verge of conversation at several instances during the round. The Mormon has provided his own caddie, which can do for these tournaments, if you have a willing volunteer or can pay somebody. Blaise carries his own clubs.

It wasn't as if his father was mute. He just simply chose not to speak. And he only refrained from speaking to his son.

Growing up, most afternoons Blaise and his father arrived home nearly simultaneously, he through the front door, his father the back carport entrance. Blaise walked home from school, while his father walked from the club, taking off his polo in the doorjamb, all tan lines and smelling of sod/dirt/sand. He had been the assistant golf professional at Hill Hollow Country Club for longer than Blaise had been alive and was the teaching pro, his mother said, when she met him, when she had arranged a lesson for herself, just to get out of the house after she'd been canned as a paralegal. He'd made it look so easy, his mother had said. He made everything look so simple, straight and high and soft every time, a high cut when he wanted, a low draw, playing out of the sand, the flop shot, lagging long putts. He could strike a one iron like a gunshot, hovering along the tops of the lower trees. By the end of their lesson, his mother said she was finally able to hit a ball into the air.

After arriving, his father would hustle shirtless upstairs, and the squeak of the medicine cabinet on its hinges in the bath could be heard throughout the entire house. They lived in a stone ranch, one-car garage, not very far from the course in part of the “Hill Hollow” neighborhood, although they and none of the houses around them even had two-car garages or big yards, let alone club memberships. His father took lots of pills—every time he returned home, every morning, often before bed, at least if he didn't fall asleep in the den's recliner. The pill bottles, Blaise discovered one afternoon when he was left alone in the house, were all unmarked, simply blood orange with a cream top. The pills came in all varieties of sizes, shapes, colors. Blaise never asked his mother where his father got them, but he was smart enough to know it wasn't from a pharmacist. One evening his father left one bottle out on the table, a night he'd passed out in the recliner with a golf magazine, so Blaise took a small gray lozenge. He waited and waited, but nothing happened. Maybe he was trying so hard to figure out what the pills did that he found they didn't do anything at all. That night his dreams seemed particularly vivid.

He and the Mormon exchange pars on the next four holes, further distancing themselves from the rest of the pack. Walking off the fourteenth green, his gut thumps at an unexpected sight: there she is, now, standing near the fifteenth tee, under the shade of an elm. Perhaps he really has been expecting her. There aren't many spectators, just the parents and wives and girlfriends and tipsy club members with too much time, so it's

not hard to find her. Her ruddy hand makes a visor and shades her face, so he can't tell how old she now appears. It's a question he has wondered, if at odd times: how much has his mother aged since he's last seen her? He supposes she aged when he was growing, but she always seemed the same. No vices, no lines, she said. If she took any kind of under-the-counter medication, like his father, he never saw it. Nor did she drink or smoke or even eat candy. Only when she disappeared—her great vice, one last magic trick—and returned, years later, did he see lines striating her neck and forehead. Only then did the bags sag under her eyes. What kind of vices had she finally succumbed to? This isn't the first time he's seen her since she disappeared.

Quickly, she's out of the shadow and into the second cut. At the amateurs, there's no marked-off lines, like at pro tournaments, around the tee boxes or greens; there's nobody holding the crowds back. There always looms the threat of one joker just running up and kicking your ball, hitting you in the gut, wanting to fuck something up just to have done it. His mother has moved in the first cut now, smiling toothily like she would, right before she hit one of her punch lines or before she revealed the right card. "You're doing great, baby. Really, really, really great." Her smile looked glued. "As you can see, I've just come from court, and I've got to go back. But when I saw your name on that leaderboard in the paper, I just knew I *had* to..."

As long as he can remember, at least before she left, his mother was always in court. After she had disappeared, Blaise figured he could have found her if he simply waited long enough outside the courthouse downtown. Not every time was she the attorney. The court designated an hour for her to show up, and she did, in the same moon-gray pantsuit, the only suit she let herself own. His mother was always fretting about losing her license to practice, about the reprimands the judges gave her, but more often than not she got in front of Judge Billingsworth, a silver-spackled widower who had a fondness for her, and he saw to it that she didn't face too many consequences and that there was always a blue-collar divorce in her future or the interests of a pauper thief or somebody being railroaded by a debt service company. His mother said she always felt like she was on ice when she was in the courthouse. Everything in court she always put in terms of other things, and it wasn't surprising she eventually moved to golf parlance in describing her job, to birdies and pars for the course and eagles and even an albatross (when she scored a thirty-grand verdict in a slip-and-fall, pocketing ten grand herself, on top of getting fees). As she pulled strings to keep herself afloat, she was also casting them, tying the world together. In the last three years he had seen her just once before, from far away, at the weekly outdoor jazz performances in June, sitting with a man in Ray-Bans whom Blaise didn't recognize, his fingertips stroking her ponytail. Why had he never gone to the courthouses and looked through the judges' schedules? He liked the idea that he could find her if he wanted to, but he didn't like the idea of finding her.

“Aren’t you going to say something, honey?”

His drive fades but not enough to keep him out of the fairway. She’s begun to stalk his steps as Blaise and the Mormon, who has pulled his drive into a copse of trees on the other side of the fairway, split. “I told you why I wasn’t there. They wouldn’t even let me out for the funeral. Not even I could pull enough strings. He died in the middle of a trial, Blaise. A big trial. Just as everything had started. The minute the damn jury had been seated. Maybe I could have gotten a gimme if Judge B. were still around.”

Blaise has maybe 150 yards left to the pin, with the hole cut in far back, at the top of a ridge. The shot’s an easy nine iron.

Does she know that he knows? Perhaps she does. Perhaps it was inevitable, after she left, that his father would finally talk to him.

“Since you never asked, I’ll just tell you. I got a *big* verdict. We’re talking big, big, big, to make that thirty grand slip-and-fall look like loose chump change. This is a hole in one, champ. Enough even for fifty new suits.” She raised her arms in a flourish to show a black suit with the narrowest lapels Blaise has ever seen. “Enough that I don’t have to try a case ever again. And I know you must need some help. Do you need a new set of clubs? Do you need money for college? You start in the fall, right?” She shakes her head. “No, of course, you must have already gotten a scholarship. Did you?”

He has a simple preshot routine. After selecting his club, he stares at the target for three counts. Two practice swings in place. He turns ninety degrees, takes another practice swing, visualizes the shot up and landing softly in place, and then he lines up behind the ball. One deep breath in, one deep breath out. A second-tier pro taught him to think to himself, during his backswing: *smooth*.

The ball flies to the ridge, stays up, leaves him less than ten feet. He receives scattered applause, the loudest from his mother.

When she disappeared, his father took him out to the yard and gave him the nine iron and indicated, very slowly, thoroughly, and silently how to swing. But Blaise had already watched him enough, had already secretly practiced enough, that the wordless instruction was useless. He could already do it, and showing it earned him the first words from his father. Blaise wasn’t sure the man had actually spoken until he said it again. “That’s it,” his father said. “A born natural. The Second Coming of Gary Player.” Blaise had looked at him so curiously that his father had just smiled broadly and said, again, apparently to prove those first words: “A born natural.”

Once his father started talking, he said a lot of things. He told Blaise about his two holes in one. He told Blaise about Hill Hollow’s impish caddies, about the daily playing retirees, about the snooty kids to whom he gave lessons. About the wives who were cheating and the husbands who were gay and the watered-down cocktails and all the bugs in the kitchen.

But he also told Blaise that, in fact, he was not his father, but his mother’s boyfriend from a long time ago, from when she had become

pregnant. He told Blaise that he didn't really quite know how to say the next part, and that his mother really never knew how to say it either, which is probably why she never did. But he felt he owed it to him now, seeing as how it was just the two of them. His father and his mother had gotten into a fight, a real bad one, over what it doesn't matter anymore, and as a sort of revenge his mother had gone out on a date with a promising amateur who had just won the state title. This man, Blaise's real father, was now a golf professional, a bona fide card-carrying PGA member. He and Blaise's mother had gone to a party together, and afterwards in an upstairs bedroom Blaise had been conceived. "Not totally by your mother's choice," was the way his father—who became Pryce, really, after that revelation, something Pryce himself insisted upon—had put it. He didn't say "rape."

Blaise had many questions, but he decided he wouldn't ask. This man had taken so long to tell him anything that it seemed like he was playing into his bullshit silence by showing how much he still wanted to know. It was better, Blaise had reasoned, to just act like he didn't particularly care.

His biological father—the rapist cum PGA pro—had never fully acknowledged what he had done and had certainly not acknowledged Blaise as his son, but after a face-off with Blaise's mother many years later, he had paid for her law school tuition, as a sort of settlement. Pryce had married Blaise's mother knowing about his conception; they'd already gotten back together at that point and were "practically engaged." His mother had begged him to marry her, Pryce said. When he agreed to marry her and rear Blaise, he swore that he would provide financial help but wouldn't actually raise another man's—especially a rapist's—son.

In those days, too, Pryce continued, he was an absolute man of his word—Pryce's own father, a long-deceased Union Pacific engineer, had inculcated that point home with a variety of belts—and so he felt duty-bound to stay speechless. He wasn't rich, and his father hadn't been rich, even though they'd been surrounded by rich golfers their entire lives, and he never even made head pro. It would probably be the same for Blaise, he said, if he was so far down off the ladder that he couldn't reach the bottom rung, he'd never climb to the top. Pryce used to be a Marxist and attended a few Communist Party meetings in his youth, where he learned that Che Guevara became a revolutionary caddying for rich men. Wealth always had a way of evening things out, Pryce said. But if you were good enough at golf, if you could beat even the richest man, even Carl Goddamn Moffett, beat him at the game he and his cronies loved, you would have something on them. Or you could just close all the golf courses, like Castro did.

It was odd to Blaise hearing him talk so much and say so much, his giant lips and cavernous mouth easily able to accommodate so many words, and after the deluge of syllables that evening, Blaise wondered if he hadn't liked it better when the man was silent. The more he talked the less Blaise seemed to know about him. Never was speech such an obvious cover

for true communication as it was with Pryce. He still took his shirt off when he got home from the club, still took all the nameless pills in the nameless bottles—Pryce would never talk about those—but somehow he seemed even more unknowable.

With no reaction from the Mormon, Blaise makes the ten-foot putt, which looked much harder than it was. Straight, right up the hill. Aim into an imaginary clown's mouth, about a foot ahead of the ball, but strike as if you're hitting it ten. Your putting stroke should be like a pendulum swinging, all rhythm.

His mother's claps are again the loudest, easily. The Mormon also makes birdie, keeping him in contention, still only two shots back, with two holes to play, and he's been consistently hitting his greens in regulation. The Mormon takes off his hat, revealing his drenched hair, runs his hand over his head, places his hat back on—one of his tics.

On the next tee, their drives end only a few feet apart. Blaise considers the Mormon a sort of twin of his. With each shot, the Mormon seems looser, while Blaise feels like he is being slowly crunched by a Vise-Grip. His mother's still trailing him, hole to hole, chatting him up between shots. She talks so much and says nothing. After an errant iron in, finally missing a green, the Mormon chips in, miraculously. Blaise makes a steady two-putt par. The gallery murmur among themselves. Even the retirees have perked for some afternoon excitement. Blaise is one up, with one to go.

The par five eighteenth, Hill Hollow's signature hole, is oak-lined on the left, water-lined on the right. The fairway rises and falls in hillocks. A singular bunker is where a hill should be, middle of the short grass, ready to catch any drives that sail less than 250 yards. The green is pitched downhill from the fairway, so with your approach, in order to find the flag, you have to aim at some marker of the clubhouse. As today is the last day of the tournament, the pin is in the toughest position, the back right corner of the green, bringing the water into play again. On this hole lay Pryce's favorite accomplishment, better than his holes in one, even better than his albatross; this was the site of his favorite birdie of all time. Pryce's tee shot found the water, a lateral hazard. He elected to drop, taking a one-stroke penalty. His third shot sprayed wildly to the left, catching the broad side of one of the oaks. Hitting four from 175 yards out, in the rough, with a particularly bad side hill lie off the drop, the ball, he said, it just felt different when he struck it. The sound, the way it came off the clubface, was unlike any other shot he'd ever hit before or since. The ball landed on the front part of the green, hopped twice, and rolled straight into the cup. It was a goddamn religious experience, Pryce said, the strongest he'd ever had.

Don't hit it in the water, Blaise tells himself. Whatever you do, don't hit it in the water. Then, as he knows that this strategy could make him yank it into the trees, he tells himself not to hit it in a particular place,

because then he'll overcompensate and spray it in the other direction. He vacillates between these two positions, arguing each side to himself. The Mormon, meanwhile, ostensibly free of any inner monologue, sends his drive comfortably past the fairway bunker. He is in perfect position.

"In the hole!" his mother shouts immediately after Blaise makes impact.

His drive launches rightward from the start. It's drawing back, as it usually does, fighting against a westerly wind that has kicked up. While he has started it too far right, it draws enough to miss the water and lands in the rough, safely out of the worst trouble. The Mormon's stolid again. Last year, when he won the tournament, Blaise heard the Mormon had been silent the entire time, from the first tee to the final hole. Cyborg-level focus. On the final round he'd been paired with Alex Andrews, who now plays on scholarship at K-State and was notorious for his between-shot shit-talking. But the Mormon outlasted him. His only riposte was a trophy-raising smile. The Mormon's approach, of course, finds the middle of the green.

Out of the corner of his eye, Blaise sees his mother already hurrying up to the rough in between oaks, to find a place to watch his approach and putts. Since they are the final pairing, all of the spectators have conglomerated around the final hole, and while there hardly seemed to be any throughout the day, all together they form quite a crowd. Two, three deep. Blaise's shot flies left—he pulled it, turned the clubface over too soon—and it flies left into a gasping clump of spectators. This time he arrives greenside to find his mother standing near his ball, and her eyes light up.

"It almost hit me!" she says. "Whizzed right over my head. You tryin' to tell me something?" she says and laughs.

"It hit me," the man next to her says. He's angry. "In the chest."

Blaise apologizes twice. It takes Blaise a few moments to recognize the man, but it shouldn't have taken that long. He's a longtime member of Hill Hollow. Family owns a large regional publisher, now run by his son-in-law, but even while the man—Carl Moffett—was president/CEO/chairman, he played eighteen holes nearly every day. From Pryce, Blaise knows he's all kinds of active on the boards and committees, one of the guys who has a complete say on membership. Pryce has given him lessons several times, sometimes playing ones, and came home early to take pills. He's the type of golfer who slams his clubs against trees, talks about himself in the third person after short putts, never yells "fore." Blaise apologizes one more time, this time using Moffett's name.

"I'm going to need your information," Moffett says. "Insurance and everything."

"He's in the middle of a tournament," his mother replies. "Lay off."

"And who the hell are you?" Moffett asks.

"His lawyer. Suck it up and piss off. You consented to this by attending."

“We’ll have to let the courts figure that out.”

A nameless official pacifies the disturbance, and Blaise tries to line up his shot. Moffett barely silences himself for Blaise to chip, grumbling and mumbling. When Blaise’s ball is still in the air—he’s elected for a high flop shot, since he barely had much green to the hole—Moffett begins bitching anew. “I’m getting a headache because of this,” he says as the ball lands. “A very bad headache. I can’t even hear what I’m saying right now.” The ball lands about two feet farther than Blaise had wanted, and the resulting roll leaves him at least a dozen feet for par. “I think I’m going toretch.” The Mormon does his hat tic again, his hair no more sweaty (the only sign he is not a golfing android), and he replaces his ball after marking it needlessly for Blaise’s chip.

“Why don’t you just shut up?” his mother says.

“Because it hurts!”

The nameless official has now asked them to quiet down. Both offer their own demurrers, arguing with the official and each other. Only the official’s voice doesn’t carry to the green.

“I came here to see my son,” his mother says, in a voice that carries everywhere.

“This is *my* club,” Moffett replies. “Mine.”

Another official, more gray in hair and fatter in belly, outranks the quiet nameless official and takes Blaise’s mother by the elbow. “Why shouldn’t *he* leave?” she yells. “He’s the one who started this. I am just here to see my son!”

The Mormon never had a chance for the eagle, but his putt is close enough that he can tap in for birdie.

But then there’s another, bigger official, of both belly and arm, and his mother is elbow escorted while Blaise attempts to be unperturbed, figuring out his putt. It ostensibly breaks twice, even in twelve feet—a short move to the right, and then a longer sweep back to the left. If not for the initial right break, he’d play it two cups left, but with the initial break, it’s only a cup. At least it seems only to be a cup left.

“I just wanted to see my son!” his mother, now likely somewhere near the back entrance to the clubhouse, shrieks.

Blaise picks a spot one cup left of the hole. The pendulum swings back right and comes through left. Moffett is still watching, his hand on his forehead. Nearly as soon as he’s hit it, Blaise knows he missed, but the ball fights back, sweeps a bit more left than it at first seemed.

It will still go in, he realizes, if he’s hit it hard enough.

But it dies, barely two inches short. Blaise stares it down for a whole half minute, and then taps in for par.

Wealth always has a way of evening things out. The Mormon yawns.

The officials walk down to the green and escort them off. It’s all but decided that they will play a sudden-death tie breaker, replay the eighteenth first, and then move through to the sixteenth, seventeenth, and

eighteenth again if they still haven't decided it. In between, they have to verify the scorecards. Old men in embroidered Nebraska Golf Association jackets congratulate him and the Mormon but end up chatting with the Mormon more, who has suddenly been programmed for smiling conversation. They seem to be exchanging banalities. Blaise is in the clubhouse with a bottle of water, looking at a plaque in the hallway of past state amateur champions, when his mother comes up behind him.

"Did you win?" she asks.

"Tie."

"Well, congratulations!"

"We have sudden death, still. A playoff."

One of the officials, the fatter, older one, whispers something to a small coterie of NGA-jacketed men and begins to walk over the long way across the clubhouse, around the assembled throngs.

"I only have a second," his mother says, noticing the fatter official. "I'm here because I want to be *here* from now on. I want to be back again. As for family, you know, it's just you and me. So, I'm just telling you I'm back. That's all."

The fatter, older official is momentarily tied up when he accidentally knocks over a few Titleist bags.

"Aren't you happy?"

The official arrives and surprisingly smiles at his mother—she has apparently talked her way out of the scuffle—before turning to Blaise. "We're ready to go, son."

His mother says something to him as he heads the door, but Blaise can't hear it. Outside, he sees the eighteenth hole, now, from the opposite way, from green to tee. The view is less intimidating this way, and the water seems distant, seems like it won't come into play, and the trees seem to provide many different windows of approach; if he hits into them, it won't be too difficult. The tiered green, also, does not appear so daunting, and he might even be able to roll it right up that slope for a birdie, even if he didn't fly it to the top shelf.

On the plaque he'd seen in the clubhouse was the name of his actual father, who'd won this tournament as a high schooler—won it by a dozen shots, an all-time record—before turning pro. Blaise had tracked it back to the year he was born, matched up the name. As a kid, Blaise had followed his career without even knowing it: he'd never won a major, but he'd won the Barclays and the Player's Championship and the Phoenix Open twice. Pryce had never won the state amateur, although he'd become a course pro, too, fairly early, so he'd only played three or four times.

"Son, are you coming?"

From the view of the club membership, who have now refilled their drinks and returned to their spots along the colonnade and are gazing back into the dropping early evening sun, their hands forming visors, it's hard to make out Blaise picking up his own clubs, slinging them over his aching shoulders, and trudging back down the fairway.