

## *Finding the Course*

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I WALK THROUGH A DARK culvert under the roadbed, the concrete ceiling just high enough to clear my head, the floor thick with greasy silt pocked by animal tracks, raccoons mostly, although possums, skunks, and rats—plenty of rats—have been there too. I can't see the light at the other end for a long time, but it never gets completely black, not even dark enough to justify a flashlight, which I don't have anyway. I'm not scared now, but I was the first time. Then, fear made my knees weak and my neck sweaty and my breath come short as the light disappeared behind me. That time, I closed my mind to the possible horrors and

forced myself forward. Now I do the same and tell myself I am not afraid. Soon I will be in the light.

The culvert burrows under tons of graded but not-yet-paved earth, the roadbed that will become US 36, a four-lane highway plied by anonymous brontosauran trucks laden with cattle and grain and chemicals and industrial provender through the town in which I live to the bridge spanning the Missouri River. The dirt is piled forty feet or more above me, a mountain of earth held up by the thick concrete shell of the culvert. If I hold my hand against the ceiling, I imagine I can feel the immense weight of it. There is no sound from above; the newly-constructed highway isn't

even paved yet. All I hear are my own heartbeats and the scrum of little clawed feet scurrying in the dark.

I press on, forcing my footsteps forward, more afraid of being afraid than of finding a creature waiting for me in the murk. Finally, the tunnel begins to brighten as each footstep carries me closer to daylight. The animals skittering ahead of me scramble out the end of the culvert before I can see them. I follow and take a huge breath of clean air and turn my face to the sunlight. After that first time, this time is easy.

The culvert opens next to Fairview Municipal Golf Course where I climb over the chain link fence and follow the creek that flows out of the culvert



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and across the course. I keep my eyes open: there are golf balls to be found. I keep them open, too, for the golf pro who runs the course. He'll confiscate any balls I find so he can sell them himself and run me off with threats to call the cops because I am trespassing.

I love rambling along the creek bank in the summer when the bullfrogs belly flop into the water as I pass. I know where to turn over rocks to find crawdads too. One way to catch them is to tie a bit of dead cricket to a string and let it drift under the rock. When they grab it with their pincers, you can pull them right out if you don't jerk it too fast. I don't know where I learned that trick, maybe from my dad. My favorite

bird on the creek is the red-winged blackbird that perches on the cattails swaying in the breeze.

Low dams make ponds at three places along the creek but they are too shallow for any fish bigger than minnows. I always thought minnows were just baby fish, but if that's what they are and the ponds are too shallow for grownup fish, how were they fathered? Maybe minnows aren't baby fish after all. Maybe they are just full-grown and tiny, flourishing where there are no big fish to eat them.

In the fall, the grass on the course turns pale sienna and washed-over ochre. The reeds along the creek bank grow brittle and rattle in the chill

breezes. Early morning frost sparkles in the sun and the grass crackles under my sneakers. Skins of ice lay over the quiet eddies of the creek and along the edges of the pond waiting for passing time to freeze over the whole of them when the winter comes on full. In that season, I leave footprints in the white rime and don't worry about detection; the golf pro has gone south for the winter, and few golfers face the cutting wind to play their game.

It is summer now, so I follow the creek to the other side of the golf course where it disappears in another culvert, this one a corrugated metal tube just barely visible in the overgrowth surrounding its mouth. The tube carries the creek under

the railroad grade that's been there much longer than the new highway. The tube under the railroad grade is round but tall enough to creep through if I duck. The bottom is flat, filled with silt that turns to gooey mud when rain raises the creek. Stalactites of black tar hang from the top like sticky spider threads that grab my hair unless I bend way over to avoid them. It's hard to walk that way for long, though, so I know I will get snagged by the tar someplace. The tube curves, so there is a stretch where light is blocked from both ends. The only way to get through without a flashlight is to trust my feet to stay out of the water in the center and to trail one hand along the tarred side

to keep my balance and my bearings. The journey through is no adventure, it's simply a filthy trek. I don't like it so I only do it once just to overcome my fear and prove to myself I can.

I could retrace my steps through the tube to get back to the golf course, but it's a nasty passage so I climb the face of the grade, push through the uncut weeds, work my way around the brambles and thorny briars until I get to the track bed on top. I know if I follow the tracks west, I will come to the swing bridge over the river.

There's nothing to fear on the railroad tracks running along the golf course. Wide sky spreads above me, a small farm squats across from the golf course on the other side of the tracks,

cinder ballast crunches beneath my feet. I walk east on the tracks, balancing on the steel rail sometimes, other times trying to match my stride to the spacing of the wooden ties.

Just before I get to a cut where the tracks go through hills on both sides, I slip off onto a narrow trail, made by deer most likely, that leads back onto the golf course. I follow it up to the highest point on the course where I can see all the way to the clubhouse atop a far hill on the other side of the creek. The ponds glisten in the distance below, the whole picture framed by railroad tracks on one side and unfinished highway on the other. I stop to take it in while I catch my breath from the climb. I am the only human in the whole vista and I relish it.

A pear tree stands off the fairway in the rough where only the worst golfers hit their balls. Its fruit is sticky sweet and juicy at summer's end. I am lucky and find a pear hanging within reach just ready to drop, perfect in its not-yet-mushy ripeness. I pluck it from the branch, look it over closely for worm holes, then take a bite. The skin pops between my teeth and the syrupy nectar floods my tongue. I have to lean forward while I eat it to keep the sticky juice from running down my chin and dripping a glorious mess onto my tee shirt.

A year later, the golf course provides another escape for me. I begin caddying when I am twelve, not long after we have moved to Jackson Street and I have discovered

the culvert, and my stepdad starts telling me I need to earn my keep. A golfer I encounter on one of my course rambles offers me a dollar to carry his bag. He's almost done with his round but tired, so I pick up an easy buck and get hooked.

I show up at the clubhouse the next Saturday morning and ask the guy behind the counter if I can caddie. "Guess so," he says, then adds, "Good luck." I don't know what he means by that, but I hang out on a bench on the clubhouse porch all morning. No one hires me, and I eventually understand his comment. There aren't any other caddies, which should have tipped me off to my prospects. Fairview is a baked-out municipal course played mostly by



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blue collar retirees. It is the opposite of a posh country club. I keep showing up, though, and asking the golfers as they walk by if they need a caddie, and occasionally someone feeling flush or taking pity on me will give me a couple of dollars—literally—to haul their clubs up and down the hills.

After a month of this, a pair of customers in my grandmother's tavern hear from her what I'm doing. They find me at the course and give me a permanent gig. Bill and Nimmie play every Saturday and Sunday morning before heading to the tavern. I carry for one or the other every weekend day. Two bucks a loop, and they buy me a Coke at the turn. I have an income as long as it doesn't rain.

I also get an introduction to golf in the classic caddie way. Bill and Nimmie cobble together a set of old clubs and a ratty bag to get me started in the game. Bill isn't much of a golfer—he hits a big, looping slice on every shot—but Nimmie is a real player. He has a flat, smooth swing that produces a running draw that plays beautifully on the hard unwatered fairways. His clubs are custom-made too, built with fiberglass shafts, a crude precursor to the graphite composite used today. Nimmie shows me how to grip a club and gives me a few pointers on how to swing it, but my ball flight resembles Bill's more than his.

Caddying is hard work, The golf bag full of clubs and gear weigh almost

as much as I do, and the course is built on three unrelenting hills. I handle it, though, learning to sling the bag across my back so the weight rests on my hips and not my shoulders. My second year, I splurge on a pair of leather golf shoes. They give my feet a lot more support than the sneakers that I wear every day, and the metal spikes provide extra traction on the hillsides. They also make a crisp, masculine crunch on the concrete sidewalk in front of the clubhouse that announces serious golfers are walking here.

Nimmie teaches me how to tend the flag, fix a ball mark on the green, replace a divot, rake a bunker. I learn to mentally link where the ball lands with a landmark like a tree or bush so I can

find it in the rough if necessary. When my player is hitting, I stand slightly aside from face-on to him, never behind his back or on the path of his backswing. It's simple stuff and mostly common sense, but an essential part of the game.

Even lugging a bag, I love walking the course. I smell fresh grass and musky leaf litter under the trees. Wind kisses my cheeks and flicks the cattails in the creek. Even when the sun glares, it cleans and brightens everything it touches while darkening the shade under the trees for contrast. I am alive and notice everything from the tiny spike mark on the green to the fairway's climb uphill to a flagstick silhouetted against clouds on the horizon. ❁



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