GRANDPA'S BRAG BOOK

Todd Dills

featherproof
light reading series

"Paw Paw's got a rabbit and three legs on us and he's been holding the thing for two months." My brother Glen was hot on his weekly phone call to the city. "You gotta get out here and take it back, man."

"But I'm not a regular player," I told him, which was the truth. Every time I played golf with them–Glen, my pop Ron, his crazy friend Chip Stricker the used-car salesman, and of course Paw Paw–if I actually came off the 18th green with the rabbit, the old men would force me to free it for their next round. Normally ownership of the rabbit–physically it's this beat-up Bugs Bunny head cover meant to go on a particular day's winner's driver, the biggest club in the bag, but it's more an idea, something to keep the round interesting, to hold over the head of your opponent like a freshly killed deer or something, a trophy–normally, ownership transferred indefinitely. You had to win a hole square to get the rabbit, someone else had to win one to free it. If you had the rabbit and won another hole before anybody freed it or took it outright, you got a leg. What my brother was telling me was that my grandfather, the 75-year-old Vincent Jones, whom we called Paw Paw, with a rabbit and three legs was four holes ahead and "I can't stand it when he's got the bunny," my brother went on. "You know how he is, gloating over you that he's so damned old he outghta be getting his ass wiped, or acting so damned senile he forgets that he's winning and that's even worse, cause you know he's faking it. Plus the stupid expression on the rabbit's face is all cartoon laughing at you. It's awful fucking humiliating."

Paw Paw certainly held at least a slight competitive advantage over my father and young Glen and even Stricker,

considering the old man had been a club pro up until a few years ago–even made a stab at the tour in his younger days–but it was also partly true that they should have been able to beat him at least occasionally.

But things didn't always work out. Such is life, and Glen was so insistent I told him I'd do my best to be out there Saturday morning, but I wasn't promising anything. It was Labor Day weekend, and I had a party my wife was forcing me to go to (at the house of a bunch of idiot bankers who thought we were something special, "artistic" types–I worked for the newspaper; my wife was a retail clerk at a clothing boutique). Pop and my brother and that crazy Stricker were the first off the tee on Saturdays, Labor Day weekend or not. I'd have to watch the booze, make it an early morning.

But me and my wife hit the party and she accused me of being aloof with the idiot bankers, though my biggest offense happened to be humming the tune to Rawhide while one of the fools was going on about buying the work of some half-assed Charlotte sculptor who used "discarded keg cups" as his raw material. I got depressed and hence drank more than my fair share of the host's liter of Makers' Mark–the next morning my head throbbed when I pulled into the Tuckaway Ridge parking lot to find Paw Paw sitting on the tailgate of his old F150, grinning, a Polaroid camera in his hand and that filthy bunny-rabbit head cover on the driver in his bag next to him. "Morning, son," he said. "You look like shit. Glen call you down to beat me, I take it?" It wasn't the first time, of course, and the old man wasn't as senile as he let on. He laughed a little and handed me

a small book–"Grandpa's Brag Book" was emblazoned in white across its front against a garish background of little pictures of tricycles and old-timey roller skates and things. "You gave me this for Christmas a long time ago," Paw Paw said. "Used to have pictures of ya'll in there, but I found a better use for it. My latest is in the rear." I was a little embarrassed that he associated the cheap thing with me. Inside were cardboard double paned pages with spaces for pictures, presumably, yes, of grandkids, but Paw Paw'd inserted shots of himself next to his golf bag, the cartoon Bugs face shining there and under each a date marking, I assumed, the date he'd won the rabbit. "Your brother loves it," Paw Paw said, and I tried to laugh, but could only manage an unconvincing half guffaw. Clearly the old man had a lot of time on his hands these days, which is really what I thought of the entire rabbit enterprise, not only his part in it. The rest of the men were "duffers," weekend golfer who come out and hack it around like Neanderthals week after week, never advancing a step in the game. But I guess that wouldn't really explain the former club pro's relish. Maybe: Golf is a game of routine. The professionals, like Paw Paw, learn to make access to the routine comparably easy. The weekend duffer–my father, brother, Stricker, and me–had to play regularly to advance any kind of score. That or you cheat, lay out all your luck on the success of booze, which was my personal trick. Booze calms the mind, eases the body into its rhythm, for the duffer's memory fades quickly.

None of the men were here yet, so I told Paw Paw that, yes, Glen had called me down to beat him, and he could look forward to a fierce competition. And I laughed genuinely, handing him back the book and setting off for the clubhouse, head pounding,

to load up on beer. When Glen and my Pop arrived, they found me drinking my second tallboy in the driver's seat of a golf cart I'd claimed for the round. I motioned Glen to join me. "Took you long enough," I said. My headache was melting away. Pop took the seat in a separate cart next to Paw Paw, who didn't say a word to him as we eased the vehicles down to the first tee. "Pop's always been partisan," my brother muttered. I downed the beer and cracked a new one. The boy hit me with the evil eye. "You know it's seven AM, don't you?" he said. "You better watch it. I need you today, son of a bitch."

My tee shot was duffed into a sand trap on the left side of the fairway, and I, like all of us but Paw Paw, double bogied the hole. Paw Paw'd gained a fourth leg on the rabbit. A hell of a bad way to start. I in turn popped open my fourth beer, and Glen laid into me about it a little. I told him it helped. The more drunk you are the less you think.

On the second hole, Stricker smacked a drive right down the middle, aced the approach shot and parred the hole, Paw Paw saving a bogey himself amazingly after losing a ball to the woods. Stricker advanced all of us one leg on the rabbit chase. Stricker was between my and my father's age, perhaps forty. He had a couple kids, though, and so acted around me and my brother like a damned grandfather himself, which put him occasionally on Paw Paw's side. He was constantly inventing excuses for his usually awful play–today it was his back, which he suggested he'd thrown out while in bed with some wayward, highly unfortunate young lady. "I thought your back was bothering you," I said, after this magnificent performance.

He removed his mirrored Ray-Ban shades and gloated a little, saying "You boys looking for trouble? Well, trouble's my middle name." Which wasn't funny, of course, and a joke he used every goddamn chance he got. My brother let it go, congratulating him in his way on taking back one of the legs from Paw Paw for us all. "That'll show the old coot," Glen spat. In the chase for the rabbit, the leader was everyone's enemy. One challenger's small victory fed directly into the camps of the other players. I stood stony-eyed, with yet another double bogey, the weekend duffer's most humiliatingly accessible routine. I opened the last of the six beers I had and finished it by the end of the third hole. "All right, game on, goddamnit," I muttered to myself. I was dizzy with drink; it wasn't even eight o'clock yet.

Half done, at the end of the first nine, my body was screaming for more booze, but I'd settled into a groove in my game just the same, thankfully, and Paw Paw and his brag book were fading. Between me and crazy Stricker, who'd brought along his trombone to toot should the bunny be set free, we'd taken back the rabbit's three legs and the old Bugs Bunny head cover hung to Paw Paw's driver by a thread, screaming to be released. I picked up another six beers at the turn, my brother even joining in with a pint of Jim Beam, and from the tenth hole's tee box, I looked over at the kid's expectant eyes and Stricker positively beaming and I was drunk, yes, but on, goddamnit, after a birdie tie with Paw Paw on number nine and he hadn't said a thing since–which looking back on it might should have been ominous–and my normally ornery Pop was near to invisible, having a hell of a bad day and sitting smug and silent in the golf cart with Paw Paw.

I thought of my wife and her idiotic anger and the bankers and teed off with a three iron to lay up just to the edge of the water hazard on this par four, a short dog-leg to the left with the hazard just at the fairway's turn, and damned if I didn't hit it dead solid perfect. The routine memory accessed on a shot like this is below the level of the cerebrum, of course, all in the bones and muscle and, when you hit it and you can barely even feel it– though the club head moves at some hundreds of miles per hour and the ball is just sitting there solid, resolute, and then goes sailing through the air a physical miracle, silent as a winter night–it's a moment of beauty that is indescribable. My brother let fly a loud "whoo!" as I pulled the club down from its follow-through. He began a round of hand claps, and Stricker didn't gloat, but rather gave a ceremonial bow. "Goddamn, son," he said. "That was one hell of a lay-up." The ball sat right where I'd wanted it, just before the water hazard with a simple five-iron shot left to the green. But Paw Paw was up next, and he was holding his driver.

"You ain't gonna try to clear that water," I said. "That's suicide." And I laughed and shook my head, because that's exactly what he was about to do. He teed the ball up, stood back looking down the length of the fairway and, without even a practice swing, lined up just to the edge of the trees on the left and let it rip, the ball sailing long away past my shot and over the trees and water and I'd never before seen anyone do anything like that, much less this 75-year-old. He really let the gloating begin. "Now that's something to be proud of," he said, and my brother spit "goddamnit!" pulling on the bottle of bourbon under Pop's disapproving gaze. Paw Paw was turning his game up, looked like, but that wasn't enough just yet. When we got to the green,

after a beauty of a second shot that I left two feet from the hole, Paw Paw had only a par. I sunk my putt for birdie. And with that, the rabbit was set free.

It was a solemn moment. Paw Paw, his head down but with a grin stuck to his face all the while, took the ragged Bugs Bunny head cover from his driver and handed it to my Pop, always the ceremonial leader, if he rarely actually led, whose voice then boomed "The - Rabbit - Has - Been - Freed." And Stricker played a version of "Taps" on his trombone and we all bowed our heads for the next thing. Pop continued, "Let - The - Golden - Chase - Commence," which I never understood but these folks were way into the theater of it all. At least my brother and father were. Stricker always looked a little bemused behind his Ray-Bans and the mouthpiece of the trombone, but you could never tell. And now everybody was in it for real. There were birdies going down on every hole. With the field even, the pressure was off, and muscle memory set into the bodies of the weekend warriors. Seems Paw Paw birdied every hole, but one of us came through to tie him, to keep the rabbit free. It came down to the last, and my brother, you see, he was determined that it remain free or at least I win it, so I could let it go again. He was drunk, too, so that made it worse. As we bounced in the cart to the 18th tee, he was cursing and putting the pressure on. "Why don't you win it?" I kept saying, but he wasn't going for it.

"It's up to you, man," he kept saying. "I'm fucked, dontchoo let him win!"

That final hole was a tester, for sure–it favored a long ball striker–a short porch par five with a strong uphill grade. And

though I was forty years the junior of the old man, he could still belt it farther. And he did. His second shot left him with a short chip for eagle. I was looking at a 30-foot birdie putt. My brother was scowling. "Don't let him put you away," he said. He sulked like a mad baby. "I don't know what I'll do if he walks away from here with that bunny."

"Glen, it really ain't that big a deal," I said. He looked crazy, his eyes bloodshot with the bourbon, which he'd finished back on number 16. And then he looked for his salvation elsewhere. "Stricker, whatchoo layin'?" But Stricker was putting for par, as were they all. It appeared only I could save us. Paw Paw chipped onto the green and put the ball a few feet from the hole, a veritable gimme for birdie. I had to make a thirty-foot putt to keep the rabbit running.

After the old man tapped in, I lined up my putt, stood over the ball and took a deep breath, feeling a little woozy now from all the beer and the sun and the heat, out here, this late summer Labor Day weekend in South Carolina. I closed my eyes and let the rhythm of the putt take over. When I opened them, the ball was sailing by an inch to the right of the hole, turning slowly, slowly, but not enough. "Goddamnit!" my brother exclaimed, throwing his putter from the green and across the cart path to the lawn before the clubhouse, where it landed and sprung end over end over end. "Keep your damned temper in check, boys," Pop weighing in on the pettiness of it all. "My God. You shouldn't be drinking this much, either."

"The Lord don't like a drunkard, it's true," Stricker chimed in, adjusting his Ray-Bans.

The old guys putt out, finishing the round. Paw Paw

approached me with his hand outstretched. "Good round, son," he said. "Mind taking a picture for me?" and we moved over to his cart, where my father was rooting around for the head cover. As we approached, he got wide-eyed and said, "It's gone."

Then Paw Paw, who went for his brag book, realized it too was gone. We could see the culprit, now, my drunk brother, facing us across the way on the empty driving range tees. "See if you can catch me, motherfuckers!" he yelled, holding up the Bugs head cover and Paw Paw's little book, then went running off into the woods at the edge of the clearing. We all just stared.

"Well shit," I said.

"You really should lay off the drink. Particularly around him," Pop said.

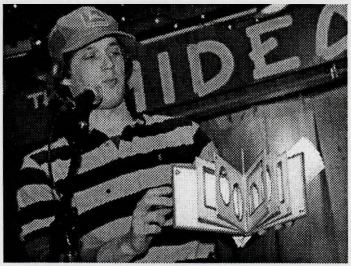
"All right," I said.

"You give me a ride home?" he said. "Your brother's got the keys to my car."

"Sure," I said. And Paw Paw, sitting in his cart and set to drive off in pursuit of the thief, wished me better luck next time, laughing, gunning the little electric motor, and I yelled that he could fuck off and me and my Pop drove on home. We talked about the fight I had with my wife, and he said I might do well to get her some flowers.

"But I am in the right," I said. And he looked sarcastically at me. "All right," I said, so we stopped at a florist shop.

With that deed done, we spent the rest of the way doing what all duffers, losers, do. We talked about the game.



Todd Dills hails from dingy Rock Hill, SC, but lives and writes in Chicago. He is the editor of THE2NDHAND, Chicago's broadsheet and online magazine for new writing (www.the2ndhand.com). He is likewise a contributor to numerous magazines, including the *Chicago Reader*, where he's on the editorial staff. He likes to drink beer, and play golf.

Hey, Thanks for reading this
*f*eatherproo*f* LIGHT READING mini-book.
For more swell stuff, pay us a visit at:

www.*f*eatherproo*f*.com