“Fore!” Gary shouted as he slugged another helpless golf ball with his three iron, straight and perfect, just like the last seven holes previous.

“Nice one! You aren’t going to give me a break are you?” I shook my head, thinking way too much about my next shot. I breathed in the scent of the fresh cut grass with a hint of pine that wisped from the bordering evergreens and stepped up to the tee, practiced a couple swings and went for it. I smacked it hard, a little further than Gary but way off to the left. My white dimpled ball landed right between two big cedar trees.

“Damn it! I just can’t shoot straight today.” I complained as we climbed back into the cart. I let Gary drive since on the road he legally wasn’t allowed to, but on the golf course under adult supervision, I figured it was okay. We finished up and scooted over to what I gathered was our last hole for the day.

“I forgot to record our scores for the last two holes,” Gary stated, pulling his flimsy paper scorecard and a stubby #2 pencil out of his golf bag.

“I stop counting at eight, so I guess that’s a snowman for me,” I replied, disappointed by my failure to make par, even once. I fiddled with the white glove on my left hand, noticing that it was wearing out by the abundance of black streaks on the palm. Sweat was building up underneath, my palm tingled with soreness and was starting to get noticeably uncomfortable.

Gary smiled, recording our scores on the card, then turned to me, “You know, I’ve been told I have a brain tumor and sometimes I forget things.” He caught me completely off guard.

We never talked about it and this was the first time he brought it up to me; just the two of us out on the vast acreage of a green golf course, alone. I felt enclosed by the massive evergreens surrounding us, the blue cloudless sky and the dewy grass underneath. I looked out at the small yellow flag waving gently in the breeze marking the 9th hole. It was a good distance away, but regardless I felt like we were in our own dome, sheltered from the world outside, sheltered from the reality that my friend was slowly expiring before my eyes.

“You seem to remember how to drive just fine.” I responded, look-
ing back at Gary. His bald head was covered by a Mariners baseball cap as he took a drink from his bottled water. The clear plastic appeared flawless under his rough-looking hand, scarred from the countless blood draws and IV insertions. His face was pale and he wore dark sunglasses to protect his sensitive blue eyes that in the last several months had witnessed more than they cared to. Although he may have looked like a stranger to me, his voice and spirit were consistent with the man I met next door to my first home. He rented out the house next to me. I was barely moved in when he saw me out in my new yard trying to differentiate between a weed and an established plant.

“Need a hand?” he asked recognizing my frustration. That was six years ago.

It had been over a year since we first received news of his diagnosis. He had eight months to live then. But fortunate for us, he was sitting right beside me in a golf cart eagerly awaiting the 9th hole. I couldn’t believe it. This man, given a finite amount of time to cross the last things off his to do list, took it upon himself to kick my ass at a round of golf. In fact, this was the first time we ever had the chance to golf together. Lately, it seemed that all we had was time. He had passed his supposed deadline and instead of it being a matter of time, it appeared that we had all sorts of time: time to fish, time to golf, time to watch the game; like God was playing a cruel trick on us. Gary didn’t really have cancer; he was a lab rat, an experiment, a study to determine the effects on his mental and emotional health. It wasn’t just a test on him, but on all of us. Even though deep inside I knew that wasn’t true as much as I may have wished it was.

We finished up the 9th hole and I was ready to head straight to the 19th, but Gary insisted we play all 18. Hell, we had nothing better to do, so we continued our game.

When I talk about Gary, people think that I’ve known him my whole life, when really our friendship has only consisted of a little more than half a decade. But the lessons I learned from him, whether directly or indirectly, will stick with me for a lifetime. Gary had a good fifteen years on me; he’d been married twice, divorced once and had a child from each marriage. He knew a lot about a little, and depending how you look at it, in some cases a little about a lot. But that was true essence of our friendship, to exchange information and to grow as men. When I first met Gary, I had a feeling we would
be good friends for life. Apparently, he spoke highly of me too, as his wife told me that he enjoyed my company and I was always making him think. If Gary were to do something, he would suspect I would do the opposite and for some unknown reason, our opposite traits meshed. He was more of a handyman than I and when I purchased my first starter home next to his rental, he turned out to be a lifesaver.

After Gary was diagnosed, his wife, Pam, quit her job to spend their last months together and seek the utmost treatment. This ultimately bought him more time, but it was also a longer, healthier amount of time. Gary was able to walk, fish, golf and still drink a beer or two, even after several brutal rounds of chemo. When his wife needed a break, she would call me for backup. “Come pick him up and take him somewhere,” she would say. “He’s driving me nuts.”

Gary was going stir-crazy sitting around the house, taking his meds and painkillers when needed. Unable to drive anywhere, he was quickly running out of projects around the house. He was bored with the television, tired of taking naps and sick of sitting around feeling helpless and sorry for himself, for what? Because he was dying?

The truth was that at 48-years-old, he was dying, leaving behind a wife, an adult daughter and a teenage son, an unpaid mortgage, a pile of medical bills, and all those things that you don’t even know you will look forward to. There would be no retirement, no trips to Cayman, nor would he live to see his future grandchildren; all of the things you dream about when you approach midlife. All of it blown to smithereens by a confirmed CT scan and a doctor’s diagnosis. It seemed so surreal, when Pam called me in tears, pleading me to come to the hospital. “He has cancer, Brian, in his brain…”

Besides the fact that Gary was one of my best friends, the reality of his diagnosis hit me so hard, because I had just begun a new chapter in my life. I was engaged to be married with a wedding set for the upcoming summer and my promising career as a pharmacist was flourishing. The prime of my life just seemed to be beginning and Gary’s was just ending, so quick, so harsh and so unexpectedly. My future wife and I were enjoying the company of our good friends, Pam and Gary, and now those days were numbered. It wasn’t just Gary’s life that was ending, but all of ours, together as one; one solid relationship, over. It would soon be a memory and the closing of another chapter
in all of our lives, although for one of us, it would be the final one.

Gary showed no sign of stopping as we began our tee-off at the 13th hole. It was a long one, a lot of ground to cover in a measly five strokes. I really needed to get my “A-game on,” I thought as I ran my fingers through my short, dark brown hair and sighed. Gary swung first; unlike the last twelve holes, he knocked the ball off into the heavy thicket of evergreen trees bordering the green to the left. Cursing, he stomped-off to retrieve his ball. I stepped up to make my shot, sticking to my usual tee off ritual. I practiced a few swings and smacked that ball straight and flawless down the middle of the green.

“Yes!” I cheered to myself. Revitalized from finally achieving a decent tee-off, I turned to see if Gary had found his ball yet. I could see the back of his light blue shirt and khaki pants amongst the evergreens. I started toward him to see if I could help when I noticed him just standing there, like he was staring at something and not moving a muscle. As I approached, I could see something move slightly in front of him. I squinted my eyes for a better look. I stopped in my tracks. It was a small fawn. It was hard to tell who was staring who down, but I couldn’t believe my eyes as Gary outstretched his hand, still and patient to greet the animal. The fawn, so timid and aloof, very cautiously approached him and took a quick sniff of his hand. The silence overtook me as both of them stood so still and picturesque for just a split second longer until the distant sound from a passing golf cart spooked the small creature back into the thick brush. I walked quickly up to Gary, “Looks like you have a way with animals.” Gary turned toward me, flashing a childlike grin, nodding, “If only he could have told me where my damn ball was.”

The 13th hole left me with a bogey, which I didn’t complain about, and Gary with a double bogey. That seemed like a miracle in itself aside from Gary’s brief encounter with the small deer. We finished up all eighteen holes and returned our cart. We took our clubs back to my truck and it was then that I noticed that Gary was exhausted. I felt a little guilty, as if I had pushed him to complete our game, but I knew Gary and he wasn’t a passive individual. He’d let me know when it was time to stop.

The ten mile drive back to his house was silent. I could tell Gary was tired and he may have dozed off for a few minutes. I pulled the truck into the driveway and carried his clubs into the garage. Gary got out of my truck
wincing, but trying to hide it. Pam greeted us at the door, “How was the game, boys?” We shuffled into the living room. Gary groaned as he plopped onto the couch. I sat down in a chair, Pam went into the kitchen and was back in the adjacent living room in almost no time. She was holding a glass of water and two white pills, no doubt his prescribed Oxycontin. She handed them to him and said, “Here honey, I thought you could use a few of these.” She kissed him on the forehead and asked again, “So how was the game?”

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I didn’t see Gary again for another two weeks. I called him to see if he wanted to come over and watch the football game at my place. When I spoke to Pam on the phone she said that he slept for almost two whole days after our big round of golf. I felt guilty, wishing as though she wouldn’t have even told me that, but she reassured me that to him it was worth it.

Gary came over to watch the game with me. Both as a healthcare professional and a friend to a terminally ill person, I’ve made it a bad habit of taking mental notes on Gary’s appearance and mental status every time I saw him. Today, I could tell he wasn’t quite up to speed, but I’d seen him much worse. We shared a pizza and a couple of Coronas as we watched the Seahawks get their asses kicked by Green Bay. Pam and my wife went out shopping. After the game, they returned and Pam asked, “Did Gary tell you what we’re doing next week?”

“Oh, I forgot,” he replied. “We’re going to California to see some family and then driving up the Oregon coast.”

“We haven’t been down that way in ages.” Pam added.

We continued talking about their future trip; they’d be gone for two weeks. My wife offered to check on their house. We wrapped up the conversation and told them to have a safe trip. Gary waved as they got into Pam’s car and they left. Mentally, I made plans to take him fishing as soon as they returned and he was up for it.

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It was raining the day of Gary’s funeral. As I awoke from a dreamless
slumber that morning, the sound of raindrops tapping at my bedroom window pulsed at my ears, reminding me of the difficult day that lay ahead of me. The cold, gray sky hung over me like a constant indication that something was missing. My entire body felt numb as I went through the motions of preparing myself for my friend’s memorial service.

They barely made it back from their two week drive up the coast when he fell ill. Pam had him admitted to the hospital the day after they returned; he woke up acting confused with a high fever and a horrible cough. He went into a coma two days later. Pam kept him on life support until all of the family could get into town to say their final good-byes. Gary wanted it that way. I was surprised when Pam asked me to deliver Gary’s eulogy. “Gary and I talked during our trip.” Pam swallowed hard, “You meant a lot to him…” Her voice trailed off into a deafening silence.

Desperately seeking to provide a sense of comfort but unable to find the right words, I nodded, “I’d be honored.”

“They say that when someone close to you dies, you always remember the last conversation you ever had with them.” I paused, a hard lump forming in the back of my throat.

“I wish that were true.”

I glanced out onto what seemed like a thousand people, all dressed in black, not a dry eye to be had. I looked to my wife for encouragement; she sniffled, tears streaming down her cheeks, flashing me a hard pressed smile that seemed to whisper, “Go on, you can do it.”

I continued to tell Gary’s family and friends about the day we had spent out on the golf course and his encounter at the 13th hole, where he had developed a new friendship with an innocent, graceful deer just six weeks prior. “I think Gary made his peace with God that day.” After I finished my eulogy, we proceeded out to the cemetery for the burial service. The rain had stopped and the sun was just peeking out from the gray overcast. The familiar smell of the dewy grass and the hint of pine prompted me to gaze out to the thick row of evergreen trees bordering the edge of the cemetery. I could see Gary standing next to a small fawn waving back at me with a smile, feeling no pain.