

## THE NINETEENTH

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It was getting on toward dusk as I drove down Motor Avenue one late afternoon and saw the old man walking on the far side of the road picking up lost golf balls.

I braked the car so fast I almost fell against the windshield.

I let the car stand in the middle of the street for another ten seconds (there were no cars following), and then I slowly backed up (still no cars), until I could peer over into the gully by the golf course wire screen and see the old man bend to pick up another ball and put it in a small bucket he was carrying.

No, I thought. Yes, I thought. No.

But I swerved over and parked the car and sat a moment trying to decide what to do, a mystery of tears in my eyes for no reason I could figure, and at last got out, let traffic pass, and crossed the street

heading south in the gully as the old man headed north.

We finally came face to face about fifty paces from where I had entered the gully.

"Hi," he said quietly, nodding.

"Hi," I said.

"Nice night," he said, glancing around at the turf and then down at his half-filled bucket of golf balls.

"Having luck?" I said.

"You can see." He hefted the bucket.

"Darn good," I said. "Can I help?"

"What?" he said, puzzled. "Look for more? Naw."

"I wouldn't mind," I said. "It'll be dark in another five minutes. We'd better find the darn things before it's too late."

"That's true," he said, regarding me curiously. "Why would you want to do that?"

"My dad used to come along here, years ago," I said. "He always found something. His income was small and sometimes he sold the balls for extra spending money."

"I'll *be*," said the old man. "I'm out here twice a week. Last week I sold enough balls and took my wife out to dinner."

"I know," I said.

"What?"

"I mean," I said. "Let's get going. There's one

down there. And another by the fence. I'll get the one down there."

I walked down and found the ball and brought it back and stood holding it while the old man examined my face.

"How come you're crying?" he said.

"Am I?" I said. "Look at that. Must be the wildflowers. I'm allergic."

"Do I know you?" he said abruptly.

"Maybe." I told him my name.

"I'll be darned." He laughed quietly. "That's my name, too, my last name. I don't suppose we're related."

"I don't suppose," I said.

"Because I'd remember if we were. Related, that is. Or if we'd met before."

Lord, I thought, so this is how it is. Alzheimer's is one thing. Going away forever is another. With both you forget. Once you've passed over, I guess you don't need your memory.

The old man was watching me think. It made him uncomfortable. He took the golf ball from me and put it in his bucket. "Thanks," he said.

"There's another one," I said and ran down the slope and brought it back, wiping my eyes.

"You still come here often," I said.

"Still? Why not?" he said.

"Oh, I was just wondering," I said. "If I ever



wanted to come hunting again, for the hell of it, if you were here it would make things easier."

"It sure as hell would," he agreed.

He studied my face again.

"Funny thing. I had a son once. Nice boy. But he went away. Never could figure where he went."

I know, I thought. But he didn't go away, *you* did. That's how it must be, when you're saying goodbye, people seem to go away, when all the while it's you who are backing off, fading out, going and gone.

Now the sun was completely gone and we walked in half-darkness lit only by a single street-lamp across the way. I saw a last golf ball a few feet to the old man's left and nodded. He stepped over and picked it up.

"Well, I guess that's it," he said.

He looked me in the face. "Where to?" he said.

I churned my thoughts and said, glancing ahead, "Isn't there always a nineteenth hole on every course?"

The old man gazed ahead through the dark.

"Yeah. I mean, sure. There should be one up there."

"Can I buy you a drink?" I said.

"Nice of you," he said, his eyes clouded with uncertainty. "But I don't think—"

"Just one," I urged.

"It's late," he said. "I got to go."

"Where?" I said.

That was the wrong question. His eyes clouded even more. He had to search around for a lame answer.

"Well," he said. "You see," he added. "I think . . ."

"No, don't say. I hate being nosy."

"It's all right. Well. Got to be going."

He reached out to take my hand and suddenly seized it and held it tight, staring into my eyes.

"We *know* each other," he cried. "*Don't* we?"

"Yes," I said.

"But where from? How far back?" he said.

"A long way," I said.

He wouldn't let go of my hand, he clenched it tight as if he might fall.

"What did you say your name was?"

I said my name.

"Funny," he said, and then lowered his voice.

"That's my name, too. Think. Us meeting here like this. And with the same name."

"That's the way it goes," I said.

I tried to pry my hand free but it wouldn't come. When I finally burst free I immediately shoved it back and took his hand in a similar vise.

"Next time," I said. "The nineteenth hole?"

"The nineteenth," he said. "You going to come back through here again?"

"Now that I know where you are. On certain nights. It's a good walking and finding place."

"Not many saps like me." He looked around at the empty grass path behind him. "Gets kind of lonely."

"I'll try to come more often," I said.

"You're just saying that."

"No. Honest to God."

"Honest to God is a good promise."

"The best."

"Well." Now it was his turn to pry his hand free and massage it to get the circulation back. "Here goes nothing."

And he ambled off. About ten feet along the far path he saw a final ball and picked it up. He nodded and gave it a toss.

I caught it easily and held it like a gift in my hand.

"The nineteenth," he called quietly.

"Absolutely," I called back.

And then he was gone in the darkness.

I stood there with tears running down my cheeks and felt the golf ball as I put it in my breast pocket.

I wonder, I thought, if it'll be there in the morning?