

The Twilight Greens, Ray Bradbury

The Twilight Greens

It was getting late, but he thought there was just enough sunlight left that he could play a quick nine holes before he had to stop.

But even as he drove toward the golf course twilight came. A high fog had drifted in from the ocean, erasing the light.

He was about to turn away when something caught his eye.

Gazing out at the far meadows, he saw a half dozen or so golfers playing in the shadowed fields.

The players were not in foursomes, but walked singly, carrying their clubs across the grass, moving under the trees.

How strange, he thought. And, instead of leaving, he drove into the lot behind the clubhouse and got out.

Something made him go stand and watch a few men at the driving range, clubbing the golf balls to send them sailing out into the twilight.

But still those lone strollers far out on the fairway made him immensely curious; there was a certain melancholy to the scene.

Almost without thinking, he picked up his bag and carried his golf clubs out to the first tee, where three old men stood as if waiting for him.

Old men, he thought. Well no, not exactly old, but he was only thirty and they were well on into turning gray.

When he arrived they gazed at his suntanned face and his sharp clear eyes.

One of the aging men said hello.

'What's going on?' said the young man, though he wondered why he asked it that way.

He studied the fields and the single golfers moving away in the shadows.

'I mean,' he said, nodding toward the fairway, 'you'd think they'd be heading in. In ten minutes they won't be able to see.'

'They'll see, all right,' said one of the older men. 'Fact is, we're going out. We like the late hour, it's a chance to be alone and think about things. So we'll start off in a group and then go our separate ways.'

'That's a hell of a thing to do,' said the young man.

'So it is,' said the other. 'But we have our reasons. Come along if you want, but when we're out about a hundred yards, you'll most likely find yourself alone.'

The young man thought about it and nodded.

'It's a deal,' he said.

One by one they stepped up to the tee and swung their clubs and watched the white golf balls vanish into the half dark.

They walked out into the last light, quietly.

The old man walked with the young man, occasionally glancing over at him. The other two men only looked ahead and said nothing. When they stopped the young man gasped. The old man said, 'What?'

The young man exclaimed, 'My God, I found it! How come, in this lousy light, I somehow knew where it would be?'

'Those things happen,' said the old man. 'You could call it fate, or luck, or Zen. I call it simple, pure need. Go ahead.'

The young man looked down at his golf ball lying on the grass and stepped back quietly.

‘No, the others first,’ he said.

The other two men had also found their white golf balls lying in the grass and now took turns. One swung and hit and walked off alone. The other swung and hit and then he, too, vanished in the twilight.

The young man watched them going their separate ways.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘I’ve never played in a foursome like this.’

‘It’s really not a foursome,’ said the old man. ‘You might call it a variation. They’ll go on and we’ll all meet again at the nineteenth green. Your turn.’

The young man hit and the ball sailed off into the purple-gray sky. He could almost hear it hit the grass a hundred yards out.

‘Go on,’ said the old man.

‘No,’ said the young man. ‘If you don’t mind, I’ll walk with you.’

The old man nodded, positioned himself, and hit his golf ball into the dark. Then they walked on together in silence.

At last the young man, staring ahead, trying to figure the beginning night, said, ‘I’ve never seen a game played this way. Who are those others and what are they doing here? For that matter, who are you? And finally, I wonder, what in hell am I doing here? I don’t fit.’

‘Not quite,’ said the old man. ‘But perhaps someday you will.’

‘Someday?’ said the young man. ‘If I don’t fit now, why not?’

The old man kept walking, looking ahead, but not over at the younger man.

‘You’re much too young,’ he said. ‘How old are you?’

‘Thirty,’ said the young man.

‘That’s young. Wait until you’re fifty or sixty. Then maybe you’ll be ready to play the Twilight Greens.’

'Is that what you call it, the Twilight Greens?'

'Yes,' said the old man. 'Sometimes fellows like us go out and play really late, don't come in till seven or eight o'clock; we have that need to just hit the ball and walk and hit again, then head in when we're really tired.'

'How do you know,' said the young man, 'when you're ready to play the Twilight Greens?'

'Well,' said the old man, walking quietly, 'we're widowers. Not the usual kind. Everyone has heard of golf widows, women who are left at home when their husbands play golf all day Sunday, sometimes on Saturday, sometimes during the week; they get so caught up in it that they can't quit.'

They become golfing machines and the wives wonder where in hell their husbands went. Well, in this case, we call ourselves the widowers; the wives are still at home, but the homes are cold, nobody lights a fire, meals are cooked, though not very often, and the beds are half empty. The widowers.'

The young man said, 'Widowers? I still don't quite understand. Nobody's dead, are they?'

'No,' the old man said. 'When you say "golf widows," it means women left at home when men go out to play golf. In this case, "widowers" means men who have in fact widowed themselves from their homes.'

The young man mused for a moment and then said, 'But there are people at home? There is a woman in each house, yes?'

'Oh yes,' said the old man. 'They are there. They are there. But...'

'But what?' said the young man.

'Well, look at it this way,' said the old man, still walking quietly and looking off into the Twilight Greens. 'For whatever reason, we come here at twilight, onto the fairway. Maybe because at home there is too

little talk, or too much. Too much pillow talk, or too little. Too many children, or not enough children, or no children at all. All sorts of excuses.

Too much money, not enough. Whatever the reason, all of a sudden these loners here have discovered that a good place to be as the sun goes down is out on the fairway, playing alone, hitting the ball, and following it into the fading light.'

'I see,' said the young man.

'I'm not quite sure that you do.'

'No,' said the young man, 'I do indeed, I do indeed. But I don't think I'll ever come back here again at twilight.'

The old man looked at him and nodded.

'No, I don't think you will. Not for a while, anyway. Maybe in twenty or thirty years. You've got too good a suntan and you walk too quickly and you look like you're all revved up. From now on you should arrive here at noon and play with a real foursome. You shouldn't be out here, walking on the Twilight Greens.'

'I'll never come back at night,' said the young man. 'It will never happen to me.'

'I hope not,' said the old man.

'I'll make sure of it,' said the young man. 'I think I've walked as far as I need to walk. I think that last hit put my ball too far out in the dark; I don't think I want to find it.'

'Well said,' said the old man.

And they walked back and the night was really gathering now and they couldn't hear their footsteps in the grass.

Behind them the lone strollers still moved, some in, some out, along the far greens.

When they reached the clubhouse, the young man looked at the old, who seemed very old indeed, and the old man looked at the young, who looked very young indeed.

'If you do come back,' said the old man, 'at twilight, that is, if you ever feel the need to play a round starting out with three others and winding up alone, there's one thing I've got to warn you about.'

'What's that?' said the young man.

'There is one word you must never use when you converse with all those people who wander out along the evening grass prairie.'

'And the word is?' said the young man.

'Marriage,' whispered the old man.

He shook the young man's hand, took his bag of clubs, and walked away.

Far out, on the Twilight Greens, it now was true dark, and you could not see the men who still played there.

The young man with his suntanned face and clear, bright eyes turned, walked to his car, and drove away.

The End