

The Longest Putt

A very long putt at the eighteenth on a steeply sloping green was needed to save the match. It seemed impossible. P J Balcombe was squatting down, examining the undulating path that led from his ball to the distant hole.

'Flag in or out, PJ?,' shouted his partner in the four-ball.

'Out!' exclaimed PJ Balcombe, decisively. Being addressed by his initials pleased him, because it was how he had been customarily addressed when he held an important job in the Ministry. His wife had died a few weeks previously and he had decided that a walk to the golf club might ease the pain. Three members had urged him to join them on the course when he arrived at the club house. He squinted towards the hole, assessing a meandering, thirty-five feet path over a squashed dandelion leaf that had escaped the green-keeper's eagle eye, along a smooth patch of flattened grass and then down a long, winding, descending track leading towards a cavity that seemed no bigger than a thimble.

His first impulse was to calculate the direction and carefully measure the distance to the hole before making his move. Suddenly, however, he remembered that Dorothy, his wife, had always advised him to rely on his natural instincts. The advice from another world told him to swung his putter with confident abandon.

Time paused as the ball rolled along the green sward, tumbling a little as it encountered bruised grass and swerving around the steep borrow. As it progressed along its path, PJ Balcombe recalled being in a hotel, watching as his new bride emerged from the bathroom, her eyes shining with a mixture of delight and shyness, a picture of radiant happiness he had carried in his mind throughout many years of marriage.

The ball continued towards the hole, lurching a little occasionally, its speed abating at first and then accelerating as it encountered the downwards slope. Nobody meanwhile noticed that PJ had pitched forward and lay motionless, a dazed smile on his face. The ball finally trickled into the hole, eliciting a congratulatory chorus of "Nice putt!" from the other three golfers.

After his funeral, one of his fellow golfers remarked philosophically: 'Well, at least he died happy, sinking his longest putt.'

'Did he know his ball had gone in, or was he already dead?' someone asked.

His partner replied: 'The moment PJ hit that ball he knew with absolute certainty where it was going and, what's more, where he was going.'

They all nodded solemnly, accepting that an important truth had just been expressed.