

Out

Phyllis had never been known to have abandoned a tennis tournament let alone a tennis tea. Her burly brandy snaps, bulging with whipped cream, had been arranged on a Willow Pattern platter and placed in the centre of the table. Surely this was living proof that she had intended to return. So where had she gone? The ladies of Fort Matilda Tennis Club were mystified.

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The night before Beryl's tennis tournament, the documentary went on air. Margaret had phoned in the spring from Alicante to tell her it would be shown later in the evening as the subject matter was somewhat controversial. The line was crackling and Beryl had to ask her sister to repeat herself.

'You had to send to a shop in Madrid for size 11 shoes?'

'Do you think Fraser tartan for the dress or Hunting McPherson? Which would be more flattering in bright sunlight? Margaret, who now liked to be known as Margarita, was now speaking in her loud telephone voice where every word was followed by a full stop.

Beryl took a breath. She forced herself to imagine a full-scene shot of Lindsay in a tartan dress.

'McPherson?' said Beryl weakly, before the line went dead and she found herself crumpling on the boucle covered telephone stool.

The morning after the documentary, Beryl forced herself to address the matter of the Fort Matilda Tennis Club Annual Ladies Tournament. She was entered, as usual, for the Ladies Singles. The trophies for '77 and '78 were on the sitting room mantelpiece. Could she make it a triple triumph? She retrieved her racquet from the hall cupboard where it hung on a hook behind the door. Two tightly zipped-in tennis balls bulged under the canvas cover. In the first round she was drawn against the formidable large-boned Phyllis Fullerton who would no doubt serve short and charge into the net. She was not known as 'The Rhino' for nothing. Beryl removed her racquet to inspect the strings. In the living room she made some experimental swishing movements, carefully avoiding the polished sideboard where the clock had cleared its throat and was preparing to chime the hour.

'Time to go, said Beryl.

It was a fine day for the tournament but Beryl felt unsettled. She was in plenty of time and so she decided to take the scenic route over the hill. At the top she pulled in to admire the view. She could see the wide expanse of the Clyde, gloriously blue. To the west, was Gourock pier with a ferry waiting to sail. Down below, were the first families of the day spreading out picnic blankets in the park. Her gaze swept East and found the tennis club. Five tiny courts could be seen. She wondered about the ladies who would be there in the kitchen, unwrapping scones and sandwiches for the post-match tennis tea. They would be gossiping.

As she drove to the club Beryl's thoughts returned to the previous evening and the documentary. She had recruited Peter to watch it with her. Peter had looked disgruntled and adjusted his hearing aid. She had a suspicion he was still thinking about the caterpillars which had ravaged his cauliflowers. Well, reasoned Beryl, ten o'clock on BBC2, who would be watching in Greenock? Perhaps no-one she knew would be watching. Before the Spanish sun had quite set with an artistic silhouette of Lindsay in his Hunting McPherson tartan dress, Beryl had risen from her armchair and pressed the off button, firmly. There was a silence as the clock chimed. Eleven times. Then Peter spoke.

'During the war there were a few men who volunteered for the concert party. There were men dressed as women. Great fun you know. But then, we didn't have any women in the battalion in Malaya.

'I think this is different, Peter, said Beryl her voice faltering. I think Lindsay is different.

'Shall I make the cocoa dear?' How about we talk tactics for tomorrow? I think 'The Rhino' has an unreliable second serve.

When Beryl drove down the other side of the hill she was muttering to herself. 'Tiny courts, tiny insignificant people, tiny, tiny... but the freshly painted bastions of Fort Matilda Tennis Club in brilliant white, had looked imposing, even from a distance. The club was as trim as a Clyde Cruiser. It was a place of expert umpires trained in the rules. Never would they be broken. If a ball was out, it would be immediately declared so by a shrill chorus of women in crisp, Fred Perry dresses, the creases of which had been ironed and starched with vigour.

Beryl parked in the last remaining space and manoeuvred a tray of tennis ball buns out of the boot. Phyllis Fullerton was at the door of the clubhouse blocking the way.

‘Tennis ball buns, Beryl?’ she enquired brightly. And before Beryl could reply, Phyllis had rudely peeked under the tea towel to inspect the goods. Each bun was iced in Wimbledon green with a neat white tennis score.

‘I’ll have forty-love, Beryl,’ said Phyllis with a sly grin which showed, as Peter would have it, too many teeth.

‘Actually, I’ll just leave them in the car which is in the shade for now.’

When they entered the kitchen, the room fell silent. Margaret Irving was unpeeling a doily and arrested her lean over the Victoria Sponge. For a moment Beryl wondered *if someone was going to mention the documentary*. Then May Palmer said briskly, ‘You’re on in five minutes Beryl. Just time for a warm up.’

If they were going to bring it up it wasn’t going to be now. This was a small mercy, Beryl reasoned, as she headed for the fifth court, the one hidden round the back. Another small mercy. Everyone else would be concentrated around the other courts.

The match began poorly for Beryl with Phyllis serving like a machine. They had no umpire on the back court and were obliged to count their own points.

‘That’s forty-love,’ boomed Phyllis with a volume so commanding that even the residents of Octavia Terrace would have heard the score whilst watering the potted palms of their conservatories. ‘I have earned that tennis ball bun of yours already!’

Beryl grimaced and prepared to serve. The game continued to go badly with Phyllis thundering around the court retrieving the un-retrievable. The first set was over. Beryl was gulping water from a flask when Phyllis strode over with a dangerous glint in her eye.

‘The girls were all talking about that documentary before you arrived.

Beryl spluttered, braced herself.

Phyllis lowered her voice to a kind of hiss. ‘The one with your sister and her, well husband, if you could call him that.’

Beryl breathed in, preparing herself for a venomous tirade.

‘Disgraceful. Poor you, Beryl, being related to that. If I were you...’

Suddenly, Beryl felt a surge of something she had forgotten she possessed.

Fighting spirit.

And it was coursing through her veins.

‘Shall we resume the match, Phyllis?’

This time Beryl began as she meant to go on. Lindsay was charming , funny, theatrical. He could recite Tam o' Shanter, dance a tango, play the trumpet and juggle fire. When Peter danced with Beryl he felt like her husband; when Lindsay danced with Beryl she felt, well, like a woman. Beryl began to feel stronger. Each whack of the ball, each point scored was one for Lindsay. Peter was right about Phyllis. Her second serves were lousy.

'One set all,' said Phyllis sounding disgruntled. Nevertheless, she came back fighting in the third set. Beryl was moving speedily around the court. Five four to Beryl and Phyllis was serving. She could break her on this point. Beryl lunged for the ball, made a killer return, tripped and fell. Even as she felt the agony of a twisted ankle and a badly grazed elbow, she knew she had won the game.

Phyllis loomed over her.

'Fraid that was out, old girl. Bad luck. You can't play on with that ankle. I'll drive you home. I shall be back in plenty of time to fight the next round. You're definitely out!'

Even as Phyllis was escorting her to the carpark, Beryl knew she had been cheated. That ball had never been out.

Phyllis went off to fill in the score sheet with a flourish. She remembered the tea tray of tennis buns would be needed for the tennis tea and retrieved them from Beryl's Mini. To save returning to the clubhouse, Phyllis placed the tray on the capacious back seat of her Maxi as Beryl hobbled into the passenger seat. Phyllis was notorious for her terrible driving and took corners at high speed. The tennis ball buns were sliding up and down the slippery hot vinyl of the back seat but Beryl was too fed up to care. With a dramatic gear change and noisy acceleration, Phyllis had resumed her conversation about the documentary.

'Really, these people should be locked up. How your sister puts up with that tartan monstrosity... you should advise your sister to just get rid of him...'

Beryl could stand it no longer.

'It is not a crime!' she yelled.

Phyllis slammed on the breaks.

'Well here we are anyway. I'll let you out,' snapped Phyllis. 'You can hobble from the car Beryl.'

Beryl wondered if she should advise Phyllis to wedge the buns in the boot but why bother? She watched as Phyllis accelerated up the hill. She was taking the scenic route back to the tennis club.

Afterwards she wondered if it had been her fault. There was a stubborn blood stain on her tennis dress. She found herself muttering, 'Out, out, damned spot' as she scrubbed it with bleach. Was it, she could hardly bear to think it, a form of...murder?

On the evening of the tournament, Peter had bumped into May Palmer's husband whilst walking Bumble and he had given him the news.

Phyllis had met with a terrible accident.

She had been descending the hill and had failed to brake. She had lost control and ploughed into a wall. She had not been wearing a seat belt. The car had been full of tennis ball buns.

It was a week before Beryl could find the courage to speak to Peter.

'Peter, it was my fault. I murdered Phyllis. Don't you see? When I baked the buns, I made one of them special. I iced a rubber ball as a surprise for the ladies. I was going to tell them to watch out. Whoever got the lucky ball was going to win a new racquet, purchased with the Percy Pinkerton Memorial Fund. The lucky ball must have lodged itself under the brake, making it impossible to use. It was...

'Deuce,' said Peter.

'How did you know?' asked Beryl, desperately clutching her heart.

'Simple. I stole one of your buns before you left. I'm rather fond of them but when I bit into this one, I found it rather rubbery. Bumble liked it.'

Peter produced a blue rubber ball from his pocket. But Peter knew more. According to Bill Palmer, the results from the post-mortem had solved the mystery. Phyllis had failed to brake because she had choked.

'On a tennis ball bun,' said Peter.

'Which one?' asked Beryl, clutching the sideboard for support.

'Love-All, apparently.'

Beryl was speechless. An unusual sight thought Peter.

'You know, in that damned documentary, they didn't say a word about what Lindsay did in the war,' remarked Peter who was now gazing into the distance.

Beryl looked at Peter and remembered he was solid and wise and kind.

'Now that *is* a crime...'

But Peter wasn't listening. He was at the window releasing a Cabbage White butterfly. She watched as he gently gathered it, let it fly.