

Race Night Nerves

Saturday 22nd September, 1984, London.

The Tannoy crackled into the night air at the White City Stadium.

"Racegoers, tonight marks the end of an era for this tired old lady of greyhound racing. In a few days' time the bulldozers will arrive and she will be no more.

"Racegoers, please make your final bets for Race 8, our last ever race, for the Silver Salver, prize money £7,500. You have less than two minutes to the hooter, when the booths will close. This is your last chance to win at the White City. Don't pass up on it."

Bert Finney's hand was shaking as he unbuckled "Spinaway Tom's" overcoat and whispered in the big grey dog's ear, "You're in lane three Spinno. I know son, I know, it's a bummer. So Spinno, go hell for leather out of the traps and make sure you're first into bend. OK, son. That's it, in you go, that's my boy."

Two traps to the left of Bert his sister Aggie, was easing her bitch "Melodic Mary" into trap one, usually considered the best trap to start from. Melody, her kennel name, was also a grey, from the same Dam, but a different Sire, so not full siblings. These dogs were just like Aggie and Bert, born of the same mother, the legendary Dolores Finney. Both fathers, their parts completed to Dolores's satisfaction, went unclaimed, unwanted, unrequired.

In her prime the life-long spinster Dolores Finney had been a larger than life character, statuesque, raven haired, green-eyed, with sensuous cherry red lips and a strong face. When she died suddenly of a massive heart attack, everyone knew that her offspring Robert and Agnes would struggle.

But the doomsayers had been wrong.

Bert, then twenty, three years older than Aggie, had been small, red-haired, slim to weedy and furtive. Aggie was already tall and buxom like her mother with the same dark hair and strong features. She had been snapped up by Dan Docherty, a horse man, and they had immediately started to breed a small tribe of sons, all tall, wide-shouldered fair-haired Vikings like their father. With Aggie's help, Dan had progressed well and now owned a large and successful racing stables in the Cotswolds. For Aggie, now forty-five, her greyhounds had become only a hobby.

For Bert, now balding, with a hacking, fruity smoker's cough, dog racing and breeding was all he knew. Tonight's stadium closure had been looming like a thunderhead, and Bert had been scheming a new future for himself. For this last race he had put up eight dogs but had been awarded only three places in the ballot. Earlier

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his other two dogs had bombed. By contrast, Aggie had won four places in the ballot and she already had a winner and two seconds. She was riding high, strutting her stuff, buying free drinks for all the regulars, emulating Dolores Finney of long ago.

Aggie's dogs always ran clean while Bert was suspected of giving his dogs helpers, especially if he could get some mug bookie to accept a high stakes wager on his dog. Such bets must always be placed through a creditable third party, and for this purpose Bert had cultivated a gay solicitor he trained a few dogs for, on the side. This man, Eugene Lupis, an addicted gambler, had even put up a short term loan of £30K at 10% for twenty-four hours, to allow Bert to cover his own three dogs for this last chance saloon.

If Spinno won the prizemoney *and* came in at say, 3 to 1, Bert stood to clean up with around £65K. This was Bert's first option, his Plan A. With this money Bert would head for the south of Spain, buy a small bar, and relax. If Spinno did not win or place, Bert would fall back on his Plan B. As for Plan A, Bert would walk away from the Lupis debt and again head to Spain where he might have to work in a bar rather than own it.

Whatever way it cut for him, the tiny village of Can Picafort near Marbella was his destination. It was where he always went when he said he was going to Ireland for a couple of weeks. Of course Bert would go alone. Peg Maloney and her three snooty brats would have to make their own way, just as he had done when his mother died. Bert was done with her superior complaining, her whining and scolding, going at him night and day like a dentist's drill. After the kids she had gone to university, to become a teacher, putting on airs and graces, casually forgetting that he, Bert Finney, had been the one who had funded it all while she had swanned about like a toff with her fancy pals in coffee bars.

The hooter sounded: dogs yapped in a frenzy:

"Racegoers, the hare is running, the booths are closed. Now it's all down to you to pray your dog home to a fantastic finish.

"And they're off and running. It's Spinaway Tom first into the bend. Hard on his heels is his half-sister Melodic Mary. Third is Hasting's Girl well known for her wide running and fast turn of speed through the last bend. And. . .

"Here we are now, racegoers, the leaders are off the second last bend. Hasting's Girl is edging it from Spinaway Tom with Melodic Mary on his inside. And Hasting's Girl is now two lengths clear.

"Oh, no! It's disaster for Spinaway Tom and for Melodic Mary. The big dog has tumbled off the track, taking his half-sister with him."

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"But the other dogs are spared and Hasting's Girl is six lengths clear. And Hasting's Girl is the winner. Hasting's Girl is the historic winner of tonight's top prize and the Silver. . ."

ooOoo

They had been closeted for nearly an hour waiting for the decision when the woman's face appeared round the door, checking on them.

'Excuse me, but can we go now?'

'No, not yet Mr Finney. But it should only take a few minutes more.'

The door closed and they were alone again.

'Well Aggie, sorry again about that. Mel was a nice-natured wee bitch, she had good bloodlines too. But it's always best to put them down when they have two legs broken, eh?'

'Bert, shut it. Right! The last thing I need to hear right now is you're snivelling. I loved that dog, I really did. She was like a child to me, the wee girl I'd always hoped for. Bert, tell me, did you have Spinno on something? Eh?'

'No, honest, Aggie. No, Spinno was clean, snow white. He just tried too hard for me. His heart exploded, that's what they're all saying. He was a great trier, in his nature. You'll see, that's what the inquiry will come up with. I'll miss him, he was my best dog.'

The door opened and she looked at them, sadness in her eyes.

'Mrs Docherty, could the stewards have a wee word please, in private?'

'Me? Are you sure you mean me, and not him?'

'Yes, Mrs Docherty, this is about Melodic Mary, and your other dogs. The samples, eh, there are, eh, irregularities, I'm afraid.'

'Can I go yet?'

'Actually yes, you can Mr Finney. Spinaway Tom, sorry, I mean his remains, can be collected either now, or if you prefer tomorrow. Alternatively we do offer a disposa, eh, sorry, a *funeral* arrangement, if you wish, although there would be a small charge.'

ooOoo

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Bert waited until he was well clear of the stadium before he allowed himself to smile. It had not been easy, but he had done it.

Fergal Hennessy, the bookie who had been tracking Aggie's betting pattern, had promised Bert £25K and a bonus if he got Melodic Mary disqualified as well as the other three. That had been the hardest part, because Aggie had kept Melody in her house, not in the kennels. But in the parade ring he had dropped the meat-flavoured nikethamide pill just under Melody's nose while distracting Aggie.

ooOoo

Six months later.

Bert's small bar was leased, not owned, but it was turning a steady penny. He had found a Romanian illegal in her late thirties calling herself Lidia. She did most of the work and was available when he felt the urge. It had been a good plan. He should have done it years before, he thought.

After he closed the bar for the night, Bert took a stroll under a velvet sky sparkling with diamonds and made his usual way along the cliff edge, smoking his last of the day.

'Ah, so there you are at last Bert, me old son,' said the distinctive voice from Bert's past.

Bert wheeled round as the huge fist of Dan Docherty grabbed his shirt, pushed him back until his heels were at the edge of the cliff.

'No, Dan, please, I'll make it right, honest, please Dan...'

The huge fist smashed into Bert's face, whipping his head back, driving his corpse backwards to plummet onto the rocks below.

'That's from Aggie, you wee shite!'