

## **The Last Bullet**

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*Moving Off: The Huntsman delivers two quick notes on his horn releasing the hounds to pursue their quarry.*

The Trouble began when Millicent Virginia Dunville failed to post for the 117<sup>th</sup> Annual Ladies Auxiliary Hunt Cup Tea. The Chairwoman of the Social Committee later claimed that Millicent had RSVP'd in the affirmative, but under scrutiny that assertion came into question. No one could put hands on the reply card (and it was so very nice that year, letterpress on 80-pound crème stock with the signature gold grosgrain ribbon.)

That Millicent had returned the RSVP card was never in question; she was a stickler for protocol. It was the nature of her reply—carefully inked in her signature blue fountain pen, no doubt—that was at issue. Could she have regretfully declined?

In over five decades, Millicent had never missed a Hunt Cup Tea. Not when she was nine months pregnant. Not when she suffered a broken leg from a riding

accident. Not during The Unfortunate Incident of '82, when everyone would have understood her absence. This year, at the age of 73, Millicent would have surpassed the late Sylvia Smith for the honor of longest-running attendee. Bunny Walters was to have presented her with a sterling silver mint julep cup with "M.V.D." etched in Old Maryland engrave.

The placement of Millicent's seat further complicated matters. As the recent past-president of the Ladies Auxiliary, Millicent was meant to sit with the current officers on the dais at the front of the Green Spring Mansion's Steeplechase Room. Now, all eyes faced the void.

"Like a missing tooth," Bunny whispered.

"More like a black eye," Shelby Burke (née Moorhead) replied.

Shelby advanced what would become one of several theories that day.

Millicent's absence was a purposeful slight, an act of political power wrangling over the Auxiliary's bylaws. After tallying their losses at the last membership committee meeting—members dying off at an alarming rate; new memberships anemic—Millicent had proposed a rewrite of the rules. Bloodlines, she suggested, should no longer matter for entry into the Ladies Auxiliary. "We must evolve or die," Millicent had said.

"Imagine," Shelby now said, "watering down standards after 117 years for the sake of warm bodies."

As the wait staff slid tomato aspic onto Wedgewood plates, Bunny volunteered another hypothesis. Little Sorrel had sidetracked Millicent that day. The three year-old bay gelding was the favorite in Saturday's Hunt Cup steeplechase and

Millicent had a financial stake in the horse. Bunny had heard a rumor that Little Sorrel suffered an ankle injury practicing the course that morning. “Hit the number 14 fence,” she said. Millicent must have stayed behind to consult the equine vet.

When pressed to name her source, Bunny demurred. “A lady never tells,” she said, which was Bunny’s modus operandi whenever an unsupported theory sprung of her own imagination. Not to mention her investment in a competing horse.

Besides, everyone, particularly Bunny, knew that Millicent cared more for her English hounds and the fox hunt season than she did the horses and this annual spring steeplechase competition. Once, the otherwise punctilious Millicent had been late to the tea because her prize bitch was whelping a litter. Bunny and her driver had agreed to fetch Millicent that day and after a good wait in the idling car, Bunny marched around the main house, beyond the guest cottages, to the kennels (ruining her freshly polished riding boots), to find Millicent crouched in the dirt over a mewling dog, while a perfectly fine vet stood idle.

“Gird yourself, Bunny, it’s about to get messy,” Millicent had said, but Bunny failed to avert her eyes before a writhing sack shot into a tea towel, splattering untold mess on Millicent’s wool melton jacket. Luckily, Bunny was halfway back to the car before the damned filthy creature licked away the afterbirth.

The ladies at the tea were not alone in wondering about the empty chair. The wait staff also puzzled over Ms. Dunville’s absence. Every year, at the end of the event, she was known for shadowing the Ladies Auxiliary Treasurer and slipping the headwaiter an extra envelope of cash to make up for the paltry tip. “When you have too much money it’s easy to forget yourself,” she would say.

After the Earl Grey had been steeped and sipped, after the finger sandwiches consumed and the pastries diligently ignored, the room was electric with another theory. Millicent was not at the tea because Millicent was dead. Women leaned across aisles to confer about the last time Millicent had been seen in public. No one could recall.

It was only as the women slipped on belted trench coats to face the overcast March afternoon that someone finally reached Millicent's daughter, Evelyn, by phone in New York. Evelyn deflected questions of her mother's absence with two words—*she's indisposed*.

The rumor was quickly amended. Millicent Dunville was not dead, but she was most certainly dying.

***The Chase: "Foxhunting is the grand opera of hunting. Every performance is unique; no show is ever repeated."—Introduction to Foxhunting, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.***

Word of Millicent's eminent demise leaked, by societal telephone, to Stanley Compton and Philip Eaves, directors of the Baltimore Historical Museum and the Maryland Music Conservatory, respectively.

Stanley and Philip each had a relationship with Millicent that had been meticulously developed over decades of chamber music concerts and boozy exhibition openings. When Evelyn decamped to New York, both men fretted that the pull of sleeker society would divest Millicent's portfolio to Manhattan cultural causes, but she proved devoted to Baltimore. Stanley had been assured that the

museum would get the family's impressive collection of hunt scene oils upon Millicent's death. Philip knew of a planned gift for a French Horn scholarship, a secret he extracted from an attorney in Millicent's estate planning office after a debauched charity Bordeaux tasting.

But there was the question of her cash: the kind of cash that could open a new gallery wing, or endow a conservatory outpost in Singapore. Such a historic windfall would cement a director's legacy and guarantee a multi-page spread in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

Philip got the news in China.

*It appears Millicent Dunville is quite ill*, the email read.

"Join the club," Philip said to an empty hotel room.

It was late and he sat wrapped in a fluffy robe, two tabs of Alka Seltzer sizzling in a glass next to his computer. He was in play against Juilliard for a certain violin prodigy and had spent the evening at a banquet house in the Qingpu District of Shanghai, willing his throat to open for shot after shot of baijiu liquor.

"Gan Bei!" the prodigy's father had shouted.

"Bottom's up!" Philip had replied.

Then the fast backward snap of the head and the searing liquid transformed into metal grates zesting the skin off his esophagus. One bottle drained; another arrived. Philip had despised the frat-fueled drinking at Yale and now here he was, thirty years later, with his livelihood hinging on a drinking competition disguised as a business deal. Fucking Chinese. He wondered if the president of Juilliard could keep pace.

When Philip had accepted the position in Baltimore, he had become the youngest person ever to helm an American music conservatory. He was courted fresh out of his PhD program at the Yale School of Music where he was a gifted musician in his own right. Many were surprised he went into academia instead of joining an orchestra or pursuing a solo career. Philip realized much too late that it had been the prestige of the post, and the notion of being the youngest, that had wooed him. He had believed the appointment would be the first movement in a long and illustrious career. Yet here he was, rounding 55, still renting the same townhouse near campus because buying would suggest he was staying in Baltimore.

The early years had been invigorating. He was respected for his integrity and revered as a scout of raw talent. He attracted gifted, young musicians to Baltimore and, once properly molded by the devoted faculty he had assembled, his alumni dominated the classical music world.

Philip ascended to minor celebrity status. The local paper gushed, calling him a genius. The city's elite added Philip to their guest lists. He began hosting a classical music program on the local public radio station, all the while expecting a call from conservatories in New York or London. The call never came.

It was years before Philip understood the snub. He turned out the best musicians, but he rarely turned out the checkbooks. He cobbled together enough to keep the conservatory solvent, and he garnered a few major gifts, but everyone knew that he put the music before the fundraising.

“A brilliant student roster is no longer enough,” the Board President had said to him at the last meeting.

The Board craved new buildings and Philip sensed the shift. They didn't want an educator at the top. They wanted a CEO.

*It appears Millicent Dunville is quite ill.*

This time, the words seeped past the baijiu. He knew what he had to do.

“Gan Bei, old gal,” and he downed the Alka Seltzer.

***State of Play: Foxes are only pursued in their natural habitat. Any practice that does not afford the prey a sporting chance contradicts the best traditions of the hunt.***

Three hundred years before Millicent Dunville's birth, Alexander Brooke arrived in Maryland from England with both his family and his hounds in tow. It was June of 1650 and Brooke became the first on record to import English hounds to the new colonies. He was definitely the first to pay full freight to keep his prized bitch out of steerage. Brooke found the undulating piedmont of the Green Spring Valley auspicious. The countryside resembled the great fields of England and soon like-minded landowners pocketed flasks of rye to hunt the land together.

By the 1800s, rival hunt clubs had formed. The Redtailed Foxes and the Pineridge Hounds. Each year after fall crops were harvested, the pheasant—safe in trees for now—watched as man, horse, and hound bled over the land in search of *vulpes vulpes*. They likely witnessed the notorious melee that ensued early one winter morning in 1896 when rival hounds got the scent of the same fox. The respective Masters of the Hunt demanded recompense for a breach of boundaries

and the situation threatened stalemate until Gregory Trench Moorhead chimed in with a gentleman's solution.

“We challenge you to a timber race.”

That March, at the close of fox hunting season, Moorhead's men erected 22 fences along a four-mile course and riders from the Redtailed Foxes and the Pineridge Hounds mounted steed for a steeplechase. Whichever club won the race got the honor of parceling the valley's land in the following season's fox hunt, dictating where each club could and could not ride.

The Hunt Cup was born.

Forty-four years later, Evan Miller Dunville missed the birth of his only offspring because she arrived at post time.

Millicent was stout, even as a baby, and grew to be athletic and strong. She had a gift for ferretting her quarry, bespoiling all manner of games, from hide-and-seek to Easter egg hunts, making her unpopular among the valley's female progeny.

At her father's insistence, Millicent took to the saddle early and became a proficient rider. Her horse and tack were always pristine. But while other girls braided manes in the stables, Millicent stalked the kennels. She became the youngest Whippers-In in the history of Maryland fox hunting and could corral even the unentered hounds during their cub outings.

Millicent suffered a worrisome societal debut, and predictions of spinsterhood followed her into her twenties. Then, one crisp fall day, a man's horse threw him against an oak tree during the hunt. Millicent jumped from her horse and used her stock tie and gold pin as an impromptu bandage until the paramedics

arrived. The couple married several months later. Bride and groom sported a splash of red on their matrimonial attire, a nod to the red ribbon tied on a horse's tail warning of its tendency to buck.

Millicent's husband, much like the horse that brought them together, also preferred to buck his way through life. After years of mounting indiscretions, a particularly embarrassing discovery in the east wing guest bedroom of Dunville Manor finally ended the marriage in 1982. Millicent gave him a handsome monthly stipend from the Dunville estate to relinquish all custody of their 15 year-old daughter, Evelyn. By then, Millicent was overseeing the foxhunt as Master of Masters for the Pineridge Hounds and the first of her dog kennels was under construction in the south field. Some believe it was the divorce that fueled the growth of Millicent's breeding empire, but whatever the reason, she never remarried and her kennels added to the family's already healthy fortune.

***The Huntsman: Riders must abide the huntsman's guidance in the field or utter chaos will ensue.***

Stanley Compton knew that pulling together a museum exhibition and an opening cocktail reception for 200 in a month wasn't impossible, but it was nearly so. First, there was the challenge of Board buy in. Could they be sold on the exorbitant out-of-budget expenditure? The shortened timeline?

Then there was the matter of social calendars. Finding an open evening for the coveted 6-8 p.m. time slot and securing the perfect mix of staid Blue Blood and

raucous socialite, new money financier, and cultured academic—what Stanley had dubbed the Sign of the Cross—proved no small feat. But Stanley hadn't reigned over the state's premier historical museum for more than 25 years by shying away from the impossible.

At least that's what he told himself as he straightened his tie in the bathroom mirror before the Board meeting. The scuff of hard-soled shoes on marble floors outside the door announced the arrival of the suits and he was reluctant to admit that he was nervous. This was a new sensation, induced after months of subterfuge over the finances. His unilateral decision regarding the endowment proved unwise.

"The markets will recover," the broker kept saying. "Give it time."

Stanley didn't have time. A bit of spreadsheet chicanery and so far no one was the wiser, but he couldn't keep this up.

When the Millicent Dunville opportunity presented itself, Stanley was caught off guard again. He was normally prophetic about death. He had predicted Bernard Whitehurst's demise months before others had picked up on it and had deftly worked the family to reap the reward. The Whitehurst Courtyard and Memorial Garden capped a decades-long capital campaign that had seen five new galleries and a refurbished library added to the museum's campus. The running joke among the staff was that Stanley could sell naming rights to a coat closet and damned if he didn't do just that when he turned a walk-in into the Ruth B. Evans MicroGallery.

Stanley thought himself to be like *The New York Times*, always prepped with a pre-written obit should a famous person die, only in his case it was a carefully laid plan for cashing in the chips after years of playing the game. He was infamous in

fundraising circles for a software system that he had developed to track everything from clothing sizes to food allergies for the top 100 families in the city.

Somehow he'd misread Millicent. He'd thought the old biddy would outlive him. Now he needed to throw together something last minute to remind Millicent and her family that a hefty check to the museum was an investment in legacy. With a promised gift from the Dunville estate, Stanley could consider coming clean on the endowment.

The final piece of the puzzle was the exhibit itself. That morning, Stanley had dispatched his top registrar into the vaults to mine for paintings containing hounds and she had emerged with a fine smattering, including several Henry Thomas Alken's and an en plein air portrait of the foxhunt done in the school of Winslow Homer. Just the thing.

Now to sell it to the Board. Poor timing, of course, as a sudden outlay of cash risked opening the budget to scrutiny. It helped that he was sleeping with a board member. Shelby Burke had inherited the position from her father, becoming the first female to graduate from the Ladies Auxiliary to the board proper. Stanley had abhorred the idea of a woman derailing the efficiency of his monthly meetings with trivialities, but he soon recognized the value in a woman's touch. The sex wasn't mind blowing, but it kept her in his corner.

The sex, for Shelby, was also strategic. Bedding Stanley afforded a certain level of influence at the museum. (Her decorator now chose the Scalamandre fabrics for the Winter Ball.) It meant enduring the act itself, but Shelby was expert at keeping her mind elsewhere, a technique she'd developed in the early years of

marriage to endure the thrusting and grunting. She rarely had to employ it with her husband anymore. Once a year she drank enough Sancerre to shed her clothes and join Billy Burke, the great aging tennis star, in their marital bed, but outside this deciduous coupling they rarely touched.

With Stanley, she conjured visions of her youth and the days before she'd married Billy and before the family fortunes had dwindled. Shelby had prospered the way most pretty, rich girls do. She attended the best schools, wore the latest fashion, flirted with and secured the popular boys. She had not one but two horses of her own, both snugly stabled in a barn at the apex of the Moorhead acreage. Sitting atop a horse, she could see the entire Green Spring Valley like a verdant carpet rolled out especially for her.

On her sixteenth birthday, Shelby's parents had finally acquiesced to years of needling and entered their daughter in her first official foxhunt. Shelby had thought it old fashioned that a rider under 18 couldn't wear colors—she looked so good in scarlet—so the day of the hunt she had ditched her regulation tweed in favor of a gorgeous red riding jacket liberated from the back of her mother's closet. She was the envy of her friends, who had circled her and her horse on the field as the hunters gathered. She had just waved over Benjamin Staunton so that he could get a good look at her thighs in jodhpurs when Millicent, then 30, strode over and dressed her down in front of everyone. “You wear colors when you have earned the right to wear colors,” Millicent had said. Years later, Shelby's mother still loved to tell dinner guests about the time her daughter's face turned as ruby as her contraband coat.

Shelby never outgrew her hatred of Millicent. The woman vexed her. Millicent had never been as pretty as Shelby; she hadn't been as popular. Yet somehow Millicent was invited to join the men in the library after dinner to drink bourbon. Even Shelby's brother had solicited business advice. No man had ever wanted to imbibe with Shelby outside the confines of foreplay. And now, she watched as the city's elite got into a lather at the prospect of Millicent's death.

Shelby knew, deep down, that nobody wished her dead save her housekeeper and her husband. Possibly her children. Millicent's mortality mattered. Even in death, the woman's outsized personality would shroud Shelby's life.

Shelby felt the familiar bloom of jealousy. She would play Stanley's game and publicly support the exhibition. In return for her help securing Millicent's money, she demanded naming rights to a small gallery at a fraction of the normal buy-in cost. Meanwhile, she would do everything in her power to undermine Millicent through back-alley gossip channels. No one could remember exactly where he or she had heard it, but apparently Millicent suffered alcohol-induced cirrhosis of the liver complicated by viral hepatitis C. All that bourbon, you understand, and the secret affairs with stable boys because who could possibly live alone all these years without male companionship?

Shelby performed beautifully at the Board meeting (she should have been an actress, truly) and the invitations went out a week later.

*The Pleasure of Your Company is requested*

*For the opening of a special exhibition curated from the museum's extensive collection*

*“The Noble Hound: Traditions of the Maryland*

*Hunt” Thursday, April 30*

*6:00—8:00 p.m.*

*Exhibit in the Ruth B. Evans MicroGallery*

*R.S.V.P required*

Stanley included a handwritten note with Millicent’s invitation and two weeks later her reply card arrived. He and the development staff scrutinized the blue fountain pen for signs of frailty. The “plus one” box had been checked, suggesting that Evelyn (or, perhaps, a nursing aide?) would be in tow.

“Fifty bucks says it’s cancer,” Stanley wagered his staff. “She’s been at Mayo for a clinical trial.”

“You’re on,” the Director of Development replied. “But be warned. I have it on good authority it’s her liver.”

Stanley and his staff leaked the news of Millicent’s public reemergence after weeks of being “indisposed.” The RSVPs flooded in.

***Losing the Line: When the hounds lose the scent, the fox survives to be chased another day.***

Philip knew it foolish to think that Stanley wouldn’t get wind of Millicent’s illness, but the speed of the museum’s special exhibition still surprised him. Stanley, it seemed, had the jump on him. Not that Philip could do much about that. He was,

after all, in the music business and this required a level of coordination far beyond hanging a smattering of portraits on a wall.

Philip had alarmed his staff a few weeks earlier when he had unexpectedly returned from China without signing the violinist. The alarm turned to outrage when he called an emergency staff meeting to announce a change to the end of year student concert.

The idea had come to him in his baijiu haze in Shanghai. He kept thinking he needed a quick fix to get Millicent on campus again and remind her of her love of music before she died. He needed a magic bullet to deliver her money and then it hit him. Magic Bullet. *Der Freischütz!* The opera had everything. Hunting, nature, dogs. A German folktale of a marksman entering a deal with the devil for six magic bullets that would help him win a shooting competition and the hand of his love—nevermind the seventh bullet belonging to the Devil, himself—and blam! Nature exalted, the hunt glorified. Stunning string tremolos, a lustrous choir of four horns.

Philip could see it now: the famous “Huntsmen’s Chorus” reimaged as a modern day foxhunt. They could even cast a few hounds from Millicent’s kennels.

This new plan did not go over well with the Director of the Ensemble, who was three weeks into rehearsals for the children’s opera *Brundibár*. Philip had been the one to suggest *Brundibár* in the first place, as a way to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its performance by Jews in the concentration camps.

“Now you want me to call the Director of the Jewish League and tell him that we are no longer performing *Brundibár* because we’ve decided to run an opera

celebrating German folk life instead?” the Director of the Ensemble had said. “Are you mad?”

For the first time anyone could remember, Philip had defied his faculty.

Now all he had to do was distract Millicent at Stanley’s opening and get her excited about the opera.

On the afternoon of the “Noble Hound” reception a freak cold front gathered north of Baltimore and threatened the city with a late-season slushy snow. The grounds crew draped burlap over budding crocuses and dogwood trees, giving the Whitehurst Courtyard and Memorial Garden the appearance of a Christo installation gone awry. The weather would not dampen attendance, however, not with the rumor that Millicent was to hobble back into the public sphere.

Stanley gathered his staff and distributed a minute-by-minute agenda for the evening. He pulled the head bartender aside to inform him of Millicent’s preference for Maker’s Mark. “But, between you and me, she may be off the sauce, so have the sparkling water at the ready.”

At 5:45 p.m., he went outside to the museum’s wrought iron gates and inspected the tuxedo-clad valets lining the sidewalk. Inside, a string quartet composed of young Conservatory alums tuned their instruments. A little “fuck you” to Philip. Stanley had heard about the German opera. Who did Philip think he was playing against? Now he could watch as his own musicians provided the soundtrack to Stanley’s greatest coup yet.

At 5:55, cocktails in hand, the Museum Board and their spouses gathered in an informal welcome line at the front doors. Guests streamed in. Philip arrived and offered a hand to Stanley.

“Looking forward to your little show here, Stan.”

“Enjoy the free hors d’oeuvres, Phil. I understand you musicians live off our openings.”

Just then, Millicent’s tinted stretch sedan pulled to the curb. Stanley would later pretend that he had never squeezed the hand of the Director of Development standing next to him. He most certainly did not whisper, “This is it my friend.”

The chauffeur walked around and opened the back door. A dashing man, mid-fifties and dressed in a finely tailored suit, emerged. He held out a hand for Millicent, who was dressed in a handsome silk shift dress with a fox stole at her neck.

The wind kicked up and Millicent gathered the stole around her neck. She looped her free arm through the man’s waiting elbow and they walked the stone path to the front door. Millicent looked refreshed and invigorated from a tour of overseas canine rescue facilities and a respite afterwards at the man’s family home outside Surrey, England. Of all the theories surrounding her protracted absence, “new romance” had never been forwarded.

“Shelby,” Bunny whispered, a little too loudly. “That’s one hell of a stable boy.”

Millicent reached Stanley and Philip and gave each a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Millicent, you look...well,” Stanley said.

“I wish I could say the same for you, Stanley, you look positively ashen.”

Millicent introduced her date, Edwin, a dog breeder living in London. Edwin, she explained, was in search of start-up funds for a new foundation he planned to launch. It would be dedicated to dogs returning from war zones with canine post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Philip, I got your note,” she said. “I think you’re mad to put real dogs on stage, but I’ll have my kennel manager give you a call on Monday.”

Philip and Stanley watched as Millicent and her date sidestepped the rest of the reception line, dodging the requisite chicken peck kisses, to go inside and order two bourbons from the bar.

Philip began to chuckle. Then he erupted into a hysterical laugh. Tears streamed his face. “Stan,” he put his hands on his knees to stabilize himself. “This is too much.”

“Jesus Christ. You have gone mad.” Stanley pulled the linen pocket square from his suit and handed it to Philip.

“Do you know how *Der Freischütz* ends?” Philip righted himself and dabbed at his face. “A marksman sells his soul to the devil for seven magic bullets. He hopes to win a shooting contest and the hand of his true love.”

“What are you on about?”

“He takes one shot, then another, and another. He’s on fire. He can’t miss. He raises the gun and takes aim for the final shot, but instead of hitting his mark, he hits his future bride. You understand, Stan?”

“Enlighten me.”

“He was never going to succeed, Stan. The last bullet always belonged to the devil.”