

## Ginger Rogers Once Played Tennis in North Vancouver

By John Joyce

Paul Tulley was in his front garden, half-heartedly raking leaves. The little black dog appeared from nowhere and playfully jumped up on him.

“Hello Max. Have you already forgotten your mistress? I haven’t. But that’s between you and me.”

“Max, Max come back here.” It was a local neighbour and his wife standing at the top of Paul’s driveway with another dog. It was a golden retriever, but it was just a brown dog to Paul.

“Of course you know Max well,” called out the woman, who was wearing a Sun Fun Run T.

“Oh, yes. We know each other.”

Max scampered back through the nutrient-enriched soil and joined the threesome for their walk.

Paul leant on his rake and stared at the house across the street. There were new neighbours now. Mike and Diane. Well, not new, anymore. Easter before last is when they moved in, or rather, when Peggy moved away. He recalled when he’d first heard about Max.

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“His name is Max. Lively little devil. Jumped on me,” said Anne-Marie pouring a second mug of breakfast tea. “I thought you’d like to know I brought another Amazon DVD across to Peggy.”

“What on this time? Dog training?”

“You have a thing about dogs?”

“Only dog owners who don’t control their hounds, especially when I’m out running.”

“Max is not a hound. He is a lovely Labrador Retriever. Perhaps we should think about getting a dog?”

“Never!”

Peggy and Roger Mont lived across the street and were the owners of Max. Except for reserved waves there had been little contact. Sometimes Anne-Marie brought an Amazon package across the street to Peggy. “I think Peggy buys DVDs,” said Anne-Marie over breakfast one morning. The CBC radio played in the background.

“I wonder if she has any blues or Jazz ones for me to look at?” remarked Paul who was listening to Gershwin’s ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’

“They keep to themselves, not like our previous neighbours.”

“Do you think there is something sinister about the neighbour’s wife ordering a DVD?”

“No. I don’t think so. Probably a DVD on Pilates or Yoga or Tai Chi,” said Anne-Marie in her customary Cape Breton Accent.

“Sounds like an early Christmas list from you!”

Peggy could often be seen taking the black dog for a walk. On Sunday evenings her husband Roger joined her and there appeared to be a group of dog walkers all promenading along the street destined for the park near Cleveland Dam.

About three months after the arrival of the dog, Roger suffered a heart attack during a marathon in Victoria. Anne-Marie and Paul rallied around Peggy when the tragedy struck. They invited her over many times and tried to help with her grieving. Paul was often dispatched to do odd jobs such as moving chairs and twice cleaning eaves, which he hated because of the height thing. On three occasions when Peggy wasn’t well Paul had even taken Max for a walk. Twice in the rain.

Peggy sometimes joined them for Sunday dinner but didn’t eat or speak much. She had lost a lot of weight. They learnt she had been born in California thirty three years ago but grew up in North Vancouver near the Capilano Suspension Bridge. She was an only child and her mother had died when she was ten years old. Her father never re-married but had a girlfriend. After graduating from Simon Fraser University in Environmental Studies she worked at her father’s consulting company where she met her husband Roger. She hadn’t worked for many years but spoke about getting a part-time job. Anne-Marie sometimes tried to get her to talk about her interest in movies, but there was little response. She did seem to fuss about Max a lot, but it wasn’t clear if that was a new development. Peggy was really quite dull company.

It was an April Sunday evening while Anne-Marie served lasagna and Paul viewed the clarity of his favourite Australian Cabernet Sauvignon, that Peggy came out with, “I hate rain. Don’t like the cold. I like sunlight.”

Before leaving that night, they’d all played ping pong. At first Peggy was reluctant to play, but once she got going she was unbeatable. Later that night Anne-Marie commented, “The girl was almost enjoying herself. I hope she’s coming out of it. In addition to the grief she’s depressed due to lack of sunlight around here. It’s called SAD for seasonal affective disorder. Many of my patients have it. Normally people put on a little weight though.”

“I thought in a physiotherapy clinic people only talked of their torn hamstrings?”

Anne-Marie stared out of the window and proclaimed, “My Mum always says the body often follows

the mind.”

About two weeks later Anne-Marie entered with two bags of groceries. The lettering on the outside of one proclaimed, “I’m Not A Plastic Bag,” and the other had the logo of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Paul was working on a newspaper chess puzzle.

“I ran into Peggy in the grocery store. Her Dad and his girlfriend are taking her to Palm Springs for a few weeks. She is leaving Max with one of the other couples with whom she used to dog walk. They will also be doing some house sitting for her. I said we’d also keep an eye on things.

Anne-Marie took off her coat and started to unpack the groceries. A mischievous grin grew on her face.

“It would’ve been nice to have looked after Max. Don’t you think?”

Paul glared at Anne-Marie. He then smiled as he saw the threatening knight on his puzzle.

Ten days later a postcard from Rancho Mirage, Palm Springs arrived. It was addressed to Paul and Anne-Marie.

“Playing lots of tennis. Love, Peggy.”

Though a natural redhead, Peggy returned as a blond. She had put on a little weight and she appeared often wearing tennis outfits.

About two weeks after her return Paul came across Max. He was tied up outside the library and stood on his hind legs, tail wagging, when Paul approached. Peggy suddenly appeared.

“And what might I ask is the neighbour checking out from the district library?”

“I have two DVDs on tennis. Have a look. I was hoping to take out an old Ginger Rogers movie called ‘Shall We Dance,’ but the library says it’s missing. Oh! I just remembered. My lawn mower has a problem. Do you think you could have a quick look at it some time? Would you mind?”

Then the requests really started.

“Paul, that was Peggy on the phone. Can you pop over and help her with the lawn mower?”

“It was very sweet of you to look at my bicycle. I hope to get out this year. Roger always looked after it. Would you like a cup of tea?”

A week later Paul was over in Peggy’s front driveway trying to install a cycle rack. The following week he was in her back garden digging up a humongous plant and then hauling it to a freshly dug hole at the side of the house, where, “there might be more sun.”

“Yes, over there Paul. No, on the other hand I think it should be over the fireplace. What do you think?” Helping hanging pictures this week.

“My Dad says art is a great investment. This is an E.J. Hughes. I have a Toni Onley in my bedroom. Can I get you a cup of tea?” On that visit he recalled they stood quite close and he could smell her hair. Max was always jumping around.

“There Max, be nice to Paul,” she’d said while drinking her diet cola.

Paul never drank any tea during his visits to Peggy. He went in, did his task, and came home. He could not, much to the dismay of Anne-Marie, state the colour of the carpet or style of sofa. He only could report that Peggy had a huge DVD collection, a chess set on one corner table, and a large photograph on another corner table. The photograph appeared to be of tennis players.

One Sunday afternoon, Paul was slowly raking leaves in the front lawn. He had on his favourite gardening clothes and a mug of tea on the go. Life was calm; the sun was trying to break through. He could smell the lilac, heather, and the scilla siberica. He heard a few birds singing and occasionally children’s voices calling, “Mum.” He was whistling a Gershwin tune while scooping the twigs and leaves when he was interrupted with a voice singing, “*A foggy day in London town had me low had me down...*”

“You don’t look very energetic,” Peggy greeted him.

Max skipped through the nutrient-enriched soil, populated with hyacinth and forsythia, and jumped up on Paul. Max then put his nose in a pile of leaves.

“Do you think Anne-Marie would mind me borrowing you later for ten minutes? My new lamp isn’t working properly. You’re an electrical engineer. And it’s not the light bulb.”

“I’ll check with Anne-Marie. I’m sure it will be alright.”

Before dinner Paul went over to Peggy’s and fixed the light stand. She watched him while drinking diet cola. As usual, he declined tea. A wire had come loose and while moving away he knocked over the chess set. They both had to get on their knees to pick up the pieces. A knight was missing.

“I’m not sure if it was ever there! I don’t play chess. Roger never taught me. Is it hard to learn?”

Paul shrugged his shoulders. “Well, you need all the pieces.”

“Would you mind buying one for me? I’ll give you the money. Do you think I will ever find my knight?”

“I am sure, after I have gone, you will find your knight.”

It must have been about a month after this when Paul went across to look at her water heater.

“Your pilot was out.”

“Can I get you some tea?”

“No, I’d better get back.”

“Before you leave may I show you something? Sit down.”

Peggy walked across the room and picked up the large photograph Paul had noticed before.

“The North Shore News took this on the tennis courts in North Vancouver behind the Plaza apartment building. These are my parents, and the woman in the middle is Ginger Rogers. It used to be an upscale hotel called the International Plaza Hotel. My parents went to play with Ginger while she was staying there.”

Paul stared at the former dancing icon and the beautiful woman standing next to her.

“Your mother was beautiful.”

“Thank you, her name was Lela. My parents used to take tennis lessons from Steven Yesowick, a local tennis pro who knew Ginger. She had asked him to arrange some games while she was visiting.”

Peggy placed the photograph back on the corner table and picked up her can of diet coke. Her hair was blond but Paul could make out some red hairs poking through. “The courts are still there behind the apartments, but are rarely used. It’s very difficult to gain access to them. There is also a wonderful garden back there that no one visits. I often go there and grieve for Roger and think of my mother. I also somehow feel drawn towards Ginger Rogers. Quite silly really. You should try to go there sometime. Let me know if you want to go.” Peggy lightly touched Paul’s arm. Paul froze a little but hoped it didn’t show.

“How interesting!” he quickly commented.

“Do you know much about Ginger Rogers?” asked Peggy.

“Dancing. Fred Astaire and Gershwin music. Didn’t know she played tennis.”

“My mother said she spoke of George Gershwin. Apparently there was a gift George gave Ginger that was only discovered after she died.”

A couple of days later Paul drove into his carport. The rain had stopped but there still was hint of drizzle in the air. It had been a stressful day for Paul, with long meetings and presentations concerning software implementation of his new hardware modification. Paul’s mind was still at work. He was wearing a new jacket and pants.

“My my you look good.” It was Peggy walking across the street. “You didn’t buy my chess piece yet?”

Before Paul could respond to either the compliment or the question, Max came bounding around the corner, through the moist nutrient-enriched garden soil, which also had lots of bone meal to thwart deer, past some yellow flowers, breaking the stems of several, and jumped directly up onto Paul. Two muddy prints tattooed Paul’s pants.

“Max, get down. Look what you’ve done to Paul’s pants,” Peggy scolded.

Well of course Max thought this was a game and promptly placed two more paw marks on Paul's non-cuffed, non-pleated, button fly, brownish green, 85% wool trousers.

"GET DOWN MAX! GO AWAY!"

"Don't you shout at my dog!" declared Peggy curtly as she stormed off with Max skipping behind her. Paul just stood there in shock. It had all happened so quickly.

Two days later, at breakfast while the radio played 'My Funny Valentine,' Anne-Marie inquired, with a richer than usual Cape Breton accent, "Well boyo, what are you doing about the problem across the street? And, don't think it's going away. Shouting at Max indeed. Peggy was trying to tell you she'd found her knight."

A week later Anne-Marie nonchalantly announced, "There's an Amazon package for you. What have you been buying now? Jazz documentaries?"

"Well, yes. Sort of."

The following Saturday afternoon Paul was in the front garden pulling up dandelions. It was a clear afternoon with vistas of Grouse Mountain and the Lions. He was quietly singing some Cole Porter. Suddenly Peggy arrived. Without Max.

"Thank you for the 'Shall We Dance' DVD. That dog walking scene set to Gershwin is incredible. Max also says thank you for the doggy bowl with his name."

"You're welcome. The name of the Gershwin music is 'Promenade.'"

"I don't like goodbyes, but I wanted to tell you that I'm moving to Palm Springs. Maybe I'm going home? When I was there, I met someone. Who knows?"

And then Peggy was gone. Paul looked up and the peak of Grouse Mountain appeared in a mist. And he didn't feel like singing.

Paul eventually found the gardens and tennis courts on which Ginger Rogers had played with Peggy's parents. Just as Peggy had said, they were peaceful and deserted. There was a garden-of-remembrance feeling about the place and Paul understood how someone could be drawn there. Paul wished for Peggy not to have to visit the Plaza gardens and courts ever again. That was Paul's secret gift to Peggy.

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Still leaning on his rake, Paul looked up and away from the house where Peggy used to live. Perhaps he'd visit the Plaza gardens today.

"Paul, you don't appear to be doing much work. Why don't you come in for a cup of tea? Did I just

see Max?"

“Coming Anne-Marie. Coming.”

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