

Boundaries

Steel grey clouds puffed across an aluminium backdrop, the best the higher echelons of the atmosphere could offer. On the green, white-flannelled flared trousers flapped in a breeze that veered between moderate and washing-dry-within-the-half-hour. The bowler refrained from offering his jumper to the umpire before beginning his over. This was not what Billy expected from early June. He looked to his left, where grandchild number one nursed a glass of lemonade, ice provided by Elsie behind the bar with no hint of irony, and shivered.

“Catch!” The captain’s call, fluctuating on the wind, prompted Billy to scour the sky, hand shielding eyes, trying to locate the airborne hurtle of red leather. Its thud against the fence a few metres to his right was met with a smattering of applause and a muted cheer from the pavilion.

“Six, Grandad!” said Jack.

“Yes,” sighed Billy; “and worse than that ... look!”

Billy gestured across the field to the scoreboard. A man leant out of a small window, unhooked two large boards containing the numbers nine and four, and returned them inside. Seconds later he reappeared, placing the number one and two zeros in the vacant space.

“A hundred!”

“That’s right, Jack. He’s scored a century. And you know what that means, don’t you?”

“Will he be on the telly?”

“No, lad; not likely. It just means it’s time for Pat the Hat.”

“Who’s Pat the Hat?”

“Him.” Billy pointed towards a gaunt man; suited, hair thinning on top, deep in conversation with the inhabitants of the bench three down to their right.

“Why’s he called Pat the Hat?”

“Because whenever someone scores a century, or takes three wickets in three balls, he walks round the pitch collecting money for the player in his hat. See?”

Jack looked across to where Pat was standing, holding a bucket hat in thick red, white and blue stripes. Into the hat he could see Mrs. Brady untangling coins from the knitting she was reluctant to let go of. “Oh yes.”

“Fancy a walk round the pitch? Come on, you can bring your lemonade with you.” The urgency in Billy’s voice suggested this was not a discussion. The pair lifted themselves off their bench, and headed clockwise. They would pass in turn the open entrance gates, the clubhouse and the pavilion. If they ever got there.

“Come on Jack, lad; stop dawdling?”

“You’re walking too fast, Grandad.”

“He’s catching us up.”

“Who?”

“Pat the Hat!”

Jack looked over his shoulder. Pat was only a bench behind now. Jack quickened his pace between fizzy sips.

“Don’t you want to give him some money, Grandad? I’ve got my pocket money ...”

“It’s not Pat,” Billy grumbled, face dour as the sky. “It’s that batsman. Broke my greenhouse with a shot two summers ago. Three panes of glass went in one

shot. And you know what? He's still not paid for the damage. Not a penny. He's getting no money off me, lad, Pat's hat or not."

497 words.