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When Danielle "Danni" O'Neill, a retired veterinarian and professor of animal science, reconnects with a reclusive novelist Richard "Ricky" O'Hare, their journey becomes one of rediscovery. Bound by a mere thread of shared history in the world of horse racing and a traumatic event from their youth, Danni and Ricky work to rebuild Howard Farm, a symbol of Kentucky's racing legacy, and their own lives.

As their love for each other deepens, so too does their commitment to preserving the brilliance of the Thoroughbred industry, embodied by a fiery filly named Will of Steel reminiscent of the great Ruffian. Together, they tackle the challenges of love, legacy, and the pursuit of meaning in a world marked by change. Their story takes a tragic turn, leaving those they've touched to carry forward their dreams of hope and renewal.



The Ruffian Syndrome

R. Fred Vaughan

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Foreword

The world was at a crossroads in the mid-seventies. The Vietnam War had recently drawn to a close, leaving a trail of wounded spirits and a fractured sense of purpose in its wake. The civil rights movement, feminism, and countercultural revolutions of the previous decade had reshaped society. Richard Nixon had been forced to resign as president of the United States. The cracks and contradictions of progress were visible everywhere. Against this backdrop of shifting ideals and growing disenchantment, horse racing remained an island of tradition. Rooted in centuries-old customs, it celebrated lineage and speed, often at the cost of the very animals it revered. The Thoroughbred, with its noble bearing and unparalleled athleticism, symbolized both the height of human ambition and the depths of human contradiction.

In 1975, the tragedy of Ruffian cast a long shadow over the sport. Ruffian, the near-mythical filly, represented everything people loved about racing: beauty, power, and the thrill of unrelenting speed. But her catastrophic breakdown during a nationally televised match race against the Kentucky Derby winner Foolish Pleasure exposed the fragility behind the facade of glory. The incident forced a reckoning in the racing world, sparking debates about ethics, animal welfare, and the balance between tradition and progress. For many, Ruffian's story became a symbol of both the sport's grandeur and darker undercurrents. Yet the health of racing at minor tracks survived another decade or so until other major sports venues and off-track betting usurped much of its fan base.

Against this historical and cultural canvas unfolds the story of *The Ruffian Syndrome*. This is a novel about reconciliation, legacy, and the unrelenting passage of time. It is a tale of two people, Danielle "Danni" O'Neill and Richard "Ricky" O'Hare, whose lives were shaped by the era and a shared moment of tragedy they had witnessed at a racetrack. Nearly five decades later, their reunion sparks a journey of rediscovery—not only of each other but of dreams, fears, and wounds they have carried through the intervening years.

Horse Racing: Then and Now

The world of horse racing in 1975 was very different than what is seen today. Racetracks like Longacres where Danni and Ricky had first met were vibrant, almost sacred places. These were places where breeders, trainers, jockeys, and fans hoped to realize the elusive dream of breeding, training, riding, or just watching perfection in a racehorse. Racetrack culture was insular, its gritty realities concealed behind the glamour of race-day spectacles. Yet, this insularity also fostered a sense of community among those who lived and worked on the backstretch—a community defined by shared hardships, fleeting triumphs, but most of all, the elusive dream.

Fast-forward to the present: Breeding practices have prioritized speed in bloodlines at the expense of soundness, adaptability, and resilience. The landscape of horse racing has evolved in profound ways by the emphasis on speed. Regulations aim to address long-standing concerns about animal welfare, but twelve horses were put down at Churchill Downs during Derby week alone. Public scrutiny has intensified, with calls for greater transparency and ethical reform. But is the call being heard? The essence of the sport—its celebration of speed, strategy, and the bond between horse and human—remains unchanged.

But, as elsewhere in our society wealth has eliminated the small-time practitioners—horsemen who bred, trained, and raced their homebreds. Breeders Cup fees have all but done away with these sources of Cinderellas. It is within this duality of change and continuity that the story of Howard Farm and its restoration finds its resonance.

The Passage of Time

For Danni and Ricky, as for all of us, the passage from late adolescence to the cusp of old age brings profound transformation. Youth is often defined by boundless ambition and the illusion of permanence. By the time we reach our sixties, life has tempered those ambitions with experience, loss, and the humbling realization of our limitations. Yet, it grants deeper understanding of what truly matters: connection, purpose, and courage to confront remaining unfinished chapters of our lives.

Danni's journey from an independent young woman steeped in the traditions of horse racing to a seasoned veterinarian and professor of animal science reflects this arc of transformation. Her life has been defined by resilience, a fierce commitment to her principles, and a deep love for the equestrian world. Ricky, by contrast, has spent much of his life retreating from connections, channeling his emotions into his writing while struggling with the weight of unresolved scars. Their reunion is not just a rekindling of an old friendship but a testament to the healing power of shared purpose.

A Story of Reclamation and Renewal

At its heart, *The Ruffian Syndrome* is a story about reclamation—of land, dreams, and relationships. The restoration of Howard Farm becomes a metaphor for the broader themes of the novel: the tension between preserving the past and embracing the future, between tradition and innovation. Through their work on the farm, Danni and Ricky confront the ghosts of their separate pasts while building something enduring and meaningful together.

The novel also explores the challenges and possibilities of renewal in the Thoroughbred industry. Danni's innovative training methods, informed by her academic expertise and a deep respect for the horses she works with, represent a vision for a more humane and sustainable future for the sport. Ricky's role as both chronicler and participant in this endeavor underscores the importance of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the past and our hopes for the future.

Why This Story Matters

In a world that often challenges our sense of identity and purpose, *The Ruffian Syndrome* highlights the profound impact of honestly acknowledging the past, maintaining genuine connections, and attaining a shared vision for the future. Spanning fifty transformative years, the novel portrays how the protagonists harness the lessons of their experiences—both those within and those beyond their control—to fulfill their deepest aspirations and redefine their lives on their own terms.

The reader becomes immersed in the re-lived past and current events on Danni and Ricky's epic journey. Their lives are re-shaped by love, loss, and a quest for meaning. One cannot avoid reflecting on the ways our own pasts shape our futures and how the connections we forge can bring purpose to even our most dismal and uncertain moments. It is a celebration of resilience, shared dreams, and the enduring beauty of finally finding one's proper place in a changing world.

Author's Preface

The Ruffian Syndrome is a contemporary literary novel that explores human frailty, resilience, and the transformative power of shared purpose. At its heart, it is a story of reconciliation—between past and present, love and loss, and two kindred spirits reunited after nearly fifty years.

When Danielle "Danni" O'Neill, a retired veterinarian and professor of animal science, reconnects with a reclusive novelist Richard "Ricky" O'Hare, their journey becomes one of rediscovery. Bound by a thread of shared history in the world of horse racing and a traumatic event from their youth, Danni and Ricky work to rebuild both Howard Farm, a symbol of Kentucky's racing legacy, and themselves.

As their romance deepens, so too does their commitment to preserving the brilliance of the Thoroughbred industry, embodied by a fiery filly named Will of Steel. Together, they tackle the challenges of love, legacy, and the pursuit of meaning in a world marked by change. Yet, their story takes a tragic turn, leaving those they've touched to carry forward their dreams of hope and renewal.

Chapter One: Danni McGee

Danielle O’Neill. That was the name beside a faceless icon that had just popped up on a Facebook message. The name rang no bells but packed away in a grey enclosure was the colloquialism, “Long time no see.” Still no bells. Of course bells don’t often ring for me anymore. So I clicked to delete the message.

As I rose to leave my bedroom office, already pondering what I would have for breakfast, there was a ding indicating another email had arrived. I glanced back at the indicator that read, “Facebook message from Danielle O’Neill.” Confused, I sat back down and clicked on the notification; it took me to my Facebook page where now a different profile photo (one with a face) appeared on the new message which read, “I used to be Danni McGee.” I got up and left for the kitchen wondering who I was supposed to have been for whom either Danielle O’Neill or Danni McGee would ring a bell. But I was more concerned about how my private security features had been breached.

My coffee pot had filled since I had set it in motion a while ago, so I poured a cup after dropping a slice of bread into the toaster. Jennifer, my dog since moving in with Dad, stared at me expecting that I would access her food out of the fridge. I mixed the remaining half can with the less smelly dry food and sprinkled some warm water over it, still thinking: Danni McGee? Was it McGee or O’Neill? I had buttered and jammed my toast and still I wondered who this woman could be.

I’ve known quite a few women over my long life, but I can’t remember any Danni McGee for the life of me. Although I still couldn’t recognize the name or the depiction, somehow, the way these things work, way back inside my brain synapses between neurons must have begun to fire that had not fired in years; a distant bell had finally rung and an echoing “*They’re off!*” could be heard from the racetrack speakers somewhere a long time ago, and yes, I did remember where, but it isn’t there anymore. There are a lot of racetracks that aren’t around anymore; that one had been Longacres—the only one I’ve ever known.

McGee. Yeah, that was it. Cute girl—pretty little thing—but a racetrack ragamuffin as I recall, in her teens, but smallish. ‘Bestraggled’ came to mind, though I find on searching (a habitual aspect of my trade) that it’s not a word. It ought to be. ‘Bedraggled’ is, but that’s ‘having been dragged through the mud,’ and that wasn’t my sense of her at all. She wasn’t muddy or ugly or abused, just not properly cared for. But cute. I seemed to be insisting on that.

The bell that had finally rung kept ringing from those many odd years ago, watching a horse race through a chain link fence on the backside of that long-gone racetrack. Now all these years later, I’m considering a message on my Facebook page. *Social media*, as they call it, has become more *anti-social* according to the congressional hearings I watch concerning its negative effects on society. It’s why I filtered myself away from it. An ex, Jennifer, insisted that no one under 55 would be caught dead on Facebook—as if she cared in my regard. Anyway, I passed that use-by date a long time ago, as she well knew even then.

Danni was right beside me already hollering, her fingers gripping the chain linked fence. She bounced up and down like a kid on a pogo stick as soon as the horses broke from the gate. That’s when I had first noticed her. The horses had not yet reached their stride or approached the section of the track between the half mile and three-eighths poles where I had thought I could watch the race all by myself, hidden between the perimeter fence and poplars that rimmed the track.

Danni couldn’t even have seen the horses yet from her position to the right of me, given her angle to the woven wire. The crescendo of pounding hooves and din of the race being called over the speakers were her only cues.

“Down the backside they go—Ever Ready on the lead by a head; Do It Over second by one, Thunder Run third by a half, Gold Run fourth on the extreme outside, A Little Love back two more...,” then *“Into the far turn, it’s Gold Run now on the far outside, Ever Ready second by a half...”*

“Your mom have a horse in this race?” I yelled over the thunderous cacophony, glancing down at the whirling dervish beside me.

Her screaming halted; she quit jumping for a moment to yell back, “Yes.” Then after a brief hesitation with eye contact, “but I’m betting, Gold Run.”

I turned back to watch through the fence as the horses were now indeed into the far turn, just yards away on the other side of the fence from where we stood. Above the thunderous noise and Danni's renewed screaming, I heard the jockey on Gold Run yell, "Watch out, she's going down!" But even as the other jockeys eased up to avoid calamity, that sneaky Dunn proceeded to whip Gold Run, charging into the lead and hugging the rail to save ground around the turn. He had moved her all the way over from his outside post position. I was aghast at his carelessness. He was endangering all their lives. Many on the backside and all the jockeys knew that Gold Run had bad knees and might indeed 'go down'.

Danni knew the danger better than anyone. Her mother had reluctantly entered Gold Run in her previous race for an owner who had insisted that she enter "the horse" or he'd get another trainer. He had no interest in Gold Run as a living creature or valuable broodmare despite Danni's mother pleading about the mare's fashionable breeding. That was the scuttlebutt. He'd been pleased with the winner's share of the purse and considered the claiming price paid by the new owners a bonus. "Well sold," was what he'd said afterward.

But Danni kept yelling, "Go Goldy Go!" all the way to the finish line.

Gold Run won... again... She was the class of that race... again. She had won before being claimed last time out and had now won for new owners in their colors instead of the bright red bar sinister on white silks her jockey had worn before. When I looked down, Danni had disappeared, presumably to collect her winnings from whomever had placed a bet for a minor.

I walked back to my own shedrow bothered by everything I'd witnessed. The evening feeding was already in progress, the mash was allocated. Jack seemed unhappy with my slight tardiness, but I didn't care. I walked right by him without speaking, continued down the shed row, and out through the perimeter gate without looking back. The meet would close shortly, and I would be leaving for the university anyway, but this was a statement I decided to make. I've made a few in my life—not something of which I am proud.

I returned to the office that was tucked away in the corner of the bedroom; it consisted of the mahogany desk my father had treasured and a file cabinet. That was pretty much it—and me a writer. The chair was comfortable—one of

the few luxuries my father had afforded himself. I sat in it facing a bed I had yet to make and the window beyond it with the tan shade pulled down with age cracks that showed as bright scratches in the dark room.

I activated the large screen that I had bought shortly after relocating here—one of *my* few luxuries, I guess one would have to say. I clicked the icon on Danielle’s Facebook message, taking me to her page. Vaguely now I could see in the painting that she had just made her profile photo a bit of what had been Danni McGee. But no one who only knew Danielle at this age could have guessed that the woman in the painting had been the Danni that I now remembered. Having known a young person, one can still see them in the older person, but knowing only the older person, one cannot visualize the teen from whom they sprang. By ‘older’, I knew she must be mid-sixties by now.

After that brief reflection I glanced first at the ‘Intro’ to her page, finding that Danielle is currently employed as a professor at the state university from which she had graduated. The same university from which I had graduated some very few years earlier.

But Jenni was barking away at the front door. Her breakfast seeming to have pushed a previous meal further down the tract. I got up, grabbed her leash and a green doggie bag from the kitchen, hooked her up, and exited the front door. I was met by the glare of an improbably bright sunny morning; I was sure I had heard it raining in the night, but it was bright out now. I squinted my eyes; they weren’t used to such brightness here in the northwest.

Mrs. McKinney was walking her aging mastiff by on the sidewalk in front of the house. Jenni rushed to the end of her taut leash to bark as I slammed the gloom back into the house behind me. Jenni did her stupidest me-too version of, “Come back here you macho mastiff. If I wasn’t on this leash, I’d ...’ do whatever it is little dogs threaten to do to big dogs when they’re safely on a leash.

Mrs. McKinney laughed as she said, “Beautiful day, isn’t it?” to which I nodded and attempted a pleasant grunt. The mastiff lumbered on oblivious to the threat Jenni presents and is finally out of sight beyond McKinney’s fence. Then Jenni sniffed and pissed on every green blotch of turf with its dandelions or other weeds and finally settled on her usual spot by the dead hydrangea to

make her deposit. I scooped it up and dragged her back to the darkness from which we came.

I attribute the darkness and gloom to her because Dad always insisted that I open the blind in the front window every morning. Jenni would stand there with her front paws on the sill waiting for the mastiff. Then she would go into her barking fit with Dad laughing his fool head off between coughs. It was annoying. Ever since Dad died, I leave that blind pulled down. Hence the gloom that I prefer to her incessant barking. I suppose there are alternative explanations of the darkness in which I live, but I use that one.

Back at my desk after the interruption, I saw that Danielle had previously been employed at the Pegasus Veterinary Clinic here on the west side of the mountains. She is from Keeneland, Kentucky, which I take to mean that she had been born there. She now resides at Kennydale that isn't far from here, so she either has a long commute or her Facebook page is out of date. She has 1,235 'friends' and is 'followed' by 307 people. There are only a couple of photos, in both of which she is an adult. In one photo she is wearing scrubs and rubber gloves, there's a horse laid out on an operating table beside her, readied for an operation of some kind, the other photo is of her receiving an award before an audience.

I notice finally that the painting that is now her profile photo is well done. It was signed by a J. O'Neill.

Gold Run interrupted my thoughts again. She had been a beautiful brown, almost black, filly—nearly 17 hands. I couldn't recall exactly what was said in that regard, but the gist of it was that she had an excellent pedigree that would have made her a promising brood mare prospect.

Back to her page: there was no mention of Danni—Danielle—being in a relationship (or out of one) despite having over a thousand Facebook friends. All those *friends* and no relationship? Of course I knew a Facebook friend is typically not a 'friend', most likely not even an acquaintance. My few all had some relevance to current activities in my limited lifestyle. I have set it up to preclude well-wishers.

I was wondering how Danni made it through the filter. The two Richard O'Hare fan club pages maintained by my publisher probably have followers, but I never look at those pages. I haven't listed any personal information on

this page, and I haven't ever made a post. I use it simply as pony express for necessary messaging; any message I get is usually relevant.

I glanced down through Danni's few posts, announcements for veterinary conferences intermingled annually with birthday wishes from very few of her 'friends', none of whose names I recognize after checking quite a few of them to see whether or not there's a Gunderson anywhere among them. There isn't. Ultimately, I decided I would respond to her message.

"Hi! Yes, I finally recalled the girl from fifty years ago. I see you've made a major success of your life. Congratulations. How have you been?"

It seemed a bit sophomoric, but I sent it.

Immediately the little blotch appeared that indicates the message has been received by its recipient and the little swerving dot dot dots began with brief interruptions indicating when the responder proceeds and ceases typing. It kept going for a while. I wondered what she could possibly have to say that would take that many interruptions and that much time. While I watched the dots dancing, I tried to remember anything else about her. I had only worked at the track that one spring and summer of the year I graduated from high school. She had seemed to be a feature of the backside that year and on the occasions when I had been at the track with Gunderson the year before.

All the guys, especially Gunderson, had seemed to 'know' her, although I doubted it was true; I did not. She seemed always to be cheery. I remembered that much about her, but I wasn't sure that other than the event up at the fence that I had ever spoken to her or her to me. Her mother seemed to have been respected as a trainer and a person as far as I was aware. But I really knew nothing at all about any of the gyrations that occurred in the backstretch; I had been an outsider there, like everywhere else, a local kid who groomed in the summer, not one who traveled the circuit like most race trackers.

"I'm fine," was how her response began when it finally came. She had ignored the compliment concerning her success and did not cloy any favors mentioning what might have been considered my own success. "I need to talk to you." That was it. The wavering dots seemed to have more to say about what was unsaid than what was included in this message. I was unsure how best to reply. I was not someone to whom people typically enjoyed talking... at least that is my impression of their reactions; women did sometimes like

me, but I didn't ever think it was the talking. A signature on a book was all they demanded and seemed to like whatever else I offered them. But while I hesitated, dots began their motions again and this time with few interruptions.

"I won't be a bother. Could we meet for lunch sometime this week? How about Tobago's tomorrow at noon?"

"Noon then!" I responded because I couldn't think of a good reason not to.

Tobago's is just a few blocks from here, where I was raised and left fifty some years ago; she knew that I'd know where Tobago's was located. There were no more dancing dots for which I watched and waited for some time. I went back to my writing, wondering what she could possibly "need to talk to me" about, I am no lawyer, psychologist, vet, nor MD. Writers have no unique expertise. I had opted not to ask her.

I couldn't concentrate on what I was on contract to write. My thoughts kept drifting to my eighteenth summer jam packed with the smell of horses, squeaking mechanical walkers, banging feed buckets, of hay nets, muzzles, mats, pitch forks, hay and straw bales, halters, bridles, saddles, rakes, DMSO, medicinal rubs, and wraps. It was a Pandora's box like a suitcase packed for a trip that somehow never happened and for me, never would. The suitcase doesn't get unpacked, but things are gradually removed till the suitcase is placed back in a closet with items still in it to wait for another opportunity that in this case never came. I had thought I would be there forever in that private nineteenth-century world back behind the glitter and glamor of the sport of kings.

Sport of Kings? The backside wasn't for kings. I'd sit in the guinea stand watching as a horse I'd groomed and proudly wrapped work out in the early morning, a foggy mist rising from the dew-covered dirt of the track. The muted impacts of all those hooves hitting the ground were music to my ears. Sitting up there in the scorching afternoon sun watching the races with other grooms, trainers, and owners, away from the gambling, celebrating the wins of those you know, carefully avoiding eye contact and words with those who had lost a race they had expected to win. It was more of an egalitarian utopia than a royal realm to me... except for all the smoking, drinking, and drugs... but I never really got into any of that.

I went home every night to be queried about my suspect activities as a race tracker by concerned parents who insisted almost every night that I must let it go; I was by God going to go to college. I slept in a comfortable bed instead of a cot in an unused tack room in a barn somewhere. Gunderson on the other hand had seemed to have been a part of every bit of that activity. He worked for his father who was gone most of the winter months in California. At Longacres they were stabled in the new barns that had thirty stalls. I had groomed for Jack Winlock, stabled in the old smaller barns for smaller less successful trainers. Days would go by without hanging out with Gunderson at that point.

His first name was Riley, but Gunderson was the only name anyone ever used. He was an athlete; we were teammates in football and basketball. He was quarterback and referred to me as his ‘favorite target’, my positions being wide receiver or tight end – whichever he chose for me on a given play. We both made all-conference. We played opposite forwards in basketball. So he was a ‘jock’. Me too, but to a much lesser degree. We didn’t play baseball after my sophomore year because the track opened for training in February back in those years.

I knew that there was a thing between Gunderson and Danni; it didn’t involve me. But I wondered now what might have happened to Gunderson and a relationship I had envisioned going somewhere. She had picked up the name O’Neill instead.

I felt a little uncertain the next morning in anticipation of the lunch date; I don’t know why. I’m not shy around women. But Jennifer sensed it and used it as an occasion to be particularly annoying in her barking and toiletries.

Words and their usage tend to matter more to me than to most. Danni’s “needing” to talk to me bothered me almost as if it were a major grammatical mistake. Why would she ‘need’ to talk to me? Why not just “Let’s talk”? In thinking about the dates of my grooming at the track, I figured Danni... well, Danielle must be in her mid-sixties, probably retired from teaching and back on this side of the mountains. Creating a mystery where in all likelihood there is none is what I do, what I have done with my life as a writer.

I had risen early – not my usual habit. I shaved – certainly not my usual habit. The last few years I had let myself go, one could say. Maybe it was the pandemic – I don't know. If I go out for groceries or other errands, no one recognizes me anymore. Back when I was younger, I wore sunglasses even on the darkest days for that bit of anonymity. I don't even need the N-95 mask anymore; I used it longer than was necessary. Now I look like the giant cave man in Geico commercials; although noticed in some sense, at least I'm not recognized as Richard O'Hare. But on this day, I showered and scanned my closet for something presentable to wear. I even called Roberta, who gave me some advice. But she seemed to be in a hurry; some kid was yelling at her in the background.

I arrived early and chose a table facing the doorway. At 12:14 I saw a woman exit a tan sedan; her confident stride caught my eye immediately; it was Danielle. Kinky black shoulder length hair, now with the few gray swirls bounced as she walked, framing her finely chiseled face. The olive blends of her complexion still captivated me after all these years. I stood to greet her, gripping her cool hand. Up close I sensed an olfactory aura of freshness so foreign to my current monkish way of life. My corrected impression? Cute had nothing to do with Danielle O'Neill; it hadn't with Danni either. This woman was beautiful!

I felt awkward pulling out her chair. She smiled as I helped her with her coat to drape over her chair. Before I had sat down across from her she had opened her menu purposefully as though she was interested in finding some delicacy that we both had to know was beyond the capabilities of Tobago. I watched and waited as if for a wavering dot on a Facebook message. I found myself studying her expressions as intently as I had watched those wavering dots yesterday.

“Thank you for coming, Ricky,” she said at last, seeming to be relieved, as though I might not have come or could have changed in such a way as to be unrecognizable to her memory of me as a teen.

“It's close,” I said. “Shall we order or hold off a bit?”

“Let's wait,” she said, so we waited. That seemed to be her style now, no more whirling like dervish.

Finally I said, “Fifty years is a long time,” as though it were an epiphany.

“Yes, but when you stood all that long way up to meet me, I saw that tall lanky kid who had stood by the fence above me all those years ago.”

The “lanky kid” didn’t immediately respond.

“That was the key moment of my life I think,” she continued thoughtfully. “You changed my entire life.”

“Changing lives is not what I do,” I responded, recovering my cynical identity. “Never have.”

She just looked at me – stared for a moment. “You did,” she said. “You still are.”

Again without the tools of my trade readily available I fumbled with my menu instead.

“Have you ever figured out why I was next to you up at the fence that day?” she asked.

I thought deeply about the question – probably for too long – and realized that no, I never had.

“I knew that you were the only one who might understand.” She hesitated as I squinted and squirmed. “I watched you walk back through your shed row afterward and on out the gate to never return, so I knew you understood.”

“No, I didn’t,” came to my mind but I didn’t say it... because I did finally realize that I *had* understood. How could I not have? How stupid was that six-foot-four-inch ‘lanky’ self-absorbed teenager?

“Did you follow the races after you left?” she asked.

“No.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Yes. It got worse.”

“Worse?” It was a good thing it was she who had said she needed to talk because I seemed incapable of contributing to this conversation.

“The next week I watched Goldie run from that same spot – I was alone up there, missing you more than I’ve ever missed anyone in my entire life.” Tears were welling up in her eyes. There was a matching ache in my throat I couldn’t explain.

“Did she break down,” I asked cautiously and only because it had to be asked. It’s what I do.

“She did.” Her voice broke; it was very soft and low. I reached across the table for her hand, but she pulled it back and down into her lap. “It was both her knees.” She looked down at the table. “On that turn by the three-eighths pole.”

“Jody Dunn?”

“Yes.” She sighed, looking up.

“How badly was he injured?”

“Not bad enough,” her disdain was evident. “But Johnny O broke most of the bones in his body. His horse had to be destroyed too.”

We sat there silently for a little while, with me wondering about the ‘O’ in Johnny O and Danni O before I excused my absence by, “I would have been in California by then.”

“Lucky you,” was a bit of ironic sarcasm but spoken without malice.

“I wish I had been there with you though,” I paused, realizing finally that my excuses (however valid) for not having been there were nowhere near as important as the fact that I hadn’t been there. “Not that it would have helped.”

“It would have; I needed you,” she contradicted, “but now feels like then.” She stared out the window biting into her lower lip. “It is so real to me. I’m glad you’re here now.”

“Me too,” I averred as a closing parenthesis on that awkward topic, but she opened it again.

“I think revenge is the appropriate response to evil, don’t you?” Her eyes had narrowed, still facing the window. “But we’re left with only grief and despair.”

I nodded as my silent affirmation but somehow doubting my own sincerity because I don’t have any idea what the appropriate response should be.

“Do you remember that match race on July 6th of that year?”

I did remember the debacle of maybe the most marvelous filly of all time breaking down on national television. I knew that had to be what it was she was referring to; I didn’t recall it having been July 6, 1975, but I knew it had occurred that year I had groomed at Longacres. I had watched the event up at the Kitchen and had wished I had watched it alone. I wondered whether Danni had been in the kitchen that day.

“Ruffian,” I said.

“She was the perfect filly, the most beautiful filly ever foaled, I think, the perfect racehorse, so strong, so fast... No horse had ever been in front of her until she broke down.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I remember Secretariat’s trainer being quoted as saying that he thought she might actually have been better than Secretariat.”

“She was!” Danni chimed in, “She was.”

We stared at each other absorbing the impact with thoughts of Gold Run.

“Why did it have to happen? ‘Foolish Pleasure’?” she asked rhetorically.

“He was the best they could find to run against her,” I said. “‘She died on the lead’,” I quoted from somewhere, “against the Derby winner. That’s what they say about her.”

“No, that’s not why.” She was responding to her own question seeming very agitated. “He didn’t deserve to stand in her shadow; her trainer should not have accepted that stupid challenge or made it if he did, if his horse wasn’t right, and she could not have been sound. He probably didn’t know, and he should have. Horse racing shouldn’t be like that. Once when that trainer was asked how one of his champion horses had slept the previous night, he made a joke about it. ‘How should I know, I didn’t sleep with him’, she mimicked. A good trainer has to know how his horse slept last night, or he should not run his horse the next day – or be a trainer.”

“Whiteley is a Hall of Fame trainer.” I lamely defended him.

“He ran her sore in the Sorority; I know he did, and nobody said nothin’ because she survived and won anyway.”

Still on the defense for whatever reasons, I said. “He had an organization of people surrounding her all the time to keep tabs on her. And what about the owners and all the money that had already been bet on her whether she ran or not? Thousands of people from everywhere are at that track, millions had bet on her and watched. Whiteley’s supposed to scratch her in the morning just because she didn’t sleep too well. Can you even imagine that?”

“They tried to save her, but they couldn’t,” she continued, ignoring every excuse I had made for Whiteley, but calmer nonetheless.

“Ruffian on three legs wouldn’t have been Ruffian anyway,” I said finally in another failed attempt to close the brackets on an uncomfortable topic.

“We’re more than what we do!” She was flushed and agitated when she exclaimed, “She was by Reviewer by Bold Ruler for Christ’s sake! And out of a Native Dancer mare.” I was seeing the angry, determined Danni who had been a feature of the backstretch at Longacres back then, not Danielle O’Neill.

I gave up my defenses. “Is that why you became a vet?” and then, “Have you had any success in stabilizing a hot-blooded animal with a prosthesis after a severe injury?”

“No.” There were tears again and the longest silence we had experienced thus far.

She leaned forward studying my face. “Do you get emotionally involved in what you write?”

“I try not to.”

“Why? You’d write better if you did.”

The directness of her criticism caught me off guard.

“I know it may seem petty,” she said. “But sometimes the medium *is* the message whether we like it or not, don’t you think? Like... how could you write anything meaningful about you and me here right now without getting emotional about it? When I operated on a horse with an injury, my anger and sadness at the stupidity that caused it made me better at what I did.”

I understood what she had said about herself... and that inability in me. All I could do was look at her, again for a long while, full of admiration but still a little offended. My response was, “You didn’t seem angry up at the fence that day when you ran off to collect your bet.”

Now that was dumb and cruel thing to have said.

Extreme anger was apparent in her expression then, her eyes now slits, as she quickly rose to leave my presence. Even the greatest writers could never express such contempt in mere words. I leapt from my chair to wrap her in my arms. “I am so, so sorry. Please don’t leave,” I pleaded even as she sat back down to hear me out. “I have pretended not to know; I realize that I’ve done that. Haven’t I? I mean...” I wasn’t taking my seat again until she showed no more urgency to leave. “I should have known,” I said as I sat back down. “I *did* know, Danni, didn’t I? It’s the way people walk by an injured person, looking away, pretending not to see, ignoring them. It’s self-survival cowardice, I think. It’s what people do, don’t they?”

“They do.” She hesitated, “but *you* wouldn’t.”

“I did,” I confessed. “I had to have known you hadn’t wagered on Gold Run. What you told me had been a bet had been a prayer instead. I used your words to avoid the meaning of what you were saying. I’m sorry. I think I’ve come to rely on words and I know that words can let you down.”

Now we had the longest of our silences. She let me reach across and lay my hand on top of hers.

This time it was I who broke the silence with, “Danni, why am I here?”

My mission, as revealed over cooling coffee, was to write the epic story of Danni McGee. She hadn’t explained why this story needed telling, beyond what hung unspoken between us—atonement, perhaps—but I did accept the obligation without hesitation, the way one accepts the weight of old debts.

The waitress’s increasing irritation with our dawdling manifested itself in sharp looks and pad-tapping, until we surrendered, giving her our minimal orders of soups and sandwiches. The soup grew cold at the table’s edge and with the pretense of lunch no longer needed, we abandoned it altogether. The waitress earned her tip and Danni’s tan sedan followed my Suburban the few blocks to my childhood home, where the silent walls that had protected my youthful indiscretions would now bear witness to Danni’s story.

Chapter Two: Accepting the Task

Driving away from the restaurant, her tan sedan close behind, I realized this wasn't like situations to which I had once been accustomed. "Your place or mine?" had been a euphemism for which the 'my place' option was viable as somewhere I felt comfortable. But now it only referred to where I had come to assist my dad in writing his final chapter in the comfort of *his* own home. My only excuse for still being there a minute past his death had been the need to sell this dilapidated house in this rundown neighborhood and be done with it. But in the several weeks since he finally expired, I had been working on the novel whose progress was interrupted by his phone call requesting my help during his morbid ordeal. But instead of arranging the sale of this wreck of a house, I had chosen to do what I do—write—rather than what I don't.

The house is only a few blocks from Tobago's, so there was no time to rethink offering "my place" as a viable option before I found myself cornered there in a garage with rusted wrenches on oily workbenches and dusty shelves with fruit jars filled with crooked nails and screws. Not exactly how anyone would want to present one's life to a woman you'd encountered for the first time in fifty years. But Danni's sedan was now parked right behind me on the cracked tarmac. I watched her in the side mirror with its warning that objects are closer than they appear. The mirror reflected her strolling casually from a bright sunny day into the dim light where I have cornered myself. Her finger slid through the dust on the side of my SUV until it reached my door handle.

"Isn't this where you lived growing up?" she asked as I exited my car.

"Yeah, well... I did leave home," I forced a laugh, attempting to distance myself from the type of person I'd always assumed I wasn't—but was now afraid I might be. "I never thought I'd ever come back."

"But you did."

I watched her expression trying to read between lines but there hadn't yet been enough lines to read between. I pleaded my case with, "I won't be here long." But even as I said it, it felt like a lie; it's what I deserved for ignoring so important a use-by date.

“I’m glad you did come back. Otherwise we couldn’t have met up.”

“There is an internet and airlines, you know,” I countered, realizing my insincerity. Official Richard O’Hare social media channels had deliberately been blocked to keep anyone from tracking me down and bothering me.

“You are not easily reached. That’s a very sneaky handle you have on your Facebook; it wasn’t easy for me to figure out what this ‘Wild Rabbit’ calls himself in private. And how could I have figured out a destination for my air travel?”

Taken aback again, I replied, “Yeah, I know. Fans are a pain in the ass.”

“I am an avid fan.” She feigned offense. And then, “Are you planning to entertain me here in your garage?”

“Oh, no. Sorry. We can go through here to the kitchen.”

We were met by the stale musty air I hadn’t noticed in living here except on returning from getting groceries or other chores. The garage door clunked to a close behind us and in front of us Jennifer came running with paws up on Danni, yipping and yapping. Danni didn’t seem to mind a dog jumping up on her, she stooped down to pick Jenni up and carry her on into the house.

The brightness of the afternoon was swallowed by the gloom in the dark belly of this house. I offered coffee from the thermos on the counter in the kitchen as we walked by, but she refused it. Then I strode on through to the ‘living’ room and fumbled with the blinds, trying to coax some sunlight into this dark space, only to stir up dust that floated visibly in the shafts of new light. Danni politely ignored these signs of depravity, sitting with one leg beneath her, Jenni now on her lap, in the recliner. I had grown used to seeing my prostrated father in that chair, eyes closed and mouth ajar facing a twenty-year-old blaring TV in his final days. That’s where he died.

Now Jenni sat curled up on Danni’s lap, eyes gleaming with enthusiasm for this new more pleasant presence in the house. Her laughing at Jenni struck me as perhaps the first joyous sound I had ever heard in this house. Her laugh cut through the silence, a spark of life in a space that had long forgotten such sounds if it had ever known them. I noticed the spider web up in the corner, the one I’d meant to remove days ago – or had it been weeks?

Perhaps it was seeing my embarrassment at the state of my surroundings that triggered her memory of having watched me flounder fifty years earlier as

a ‘terrified’ teenager—that was the word she used. It had been my first time to hose down a horse after a workout. I recalled the incident quite differently but do remember my vulnerability and ineptness at performing that seemingly trivial task. The feel of the sponge in the bucket of warm soapy water and the icy chill of the water from the hose all came back to me. It was unfamiliar and a real challenge for me, I would readily have admitted that, but I hadn’t been terrified. I defended my manhood by repudiating her statement with, “I don’t recall ever having been terrified.”

She continued citing incidents from my brief time at the track, bringing back memories. I could see the copper sheen of On The Road’s chestnut coat, feel the heat and see the steam rising as I hosed her every day. The strength of the muscles that rippled in her shoulders, her nicker as I walked by her down the shedrow that last time without stopping. I should have stopped; I should have told her goodbye.

With all the memories Danni evoked, what I could not recall was to have ever been so affected by the velvety depth of conversation that led nowhere in particular—just bubbling joy of human intercourse as if it had just spewed forth from an uncapped champagne bottle. All because of a singular shared event at a chain link perimeter fence at Longacres racetrack that had spawned this explosion of emotion that had been nascent then but now at last reality.

“I’m glad we crossed each other’s paths that day,” I said.

“Oh, no,” she countered defiantly, ruffling Jenni’s fur. “We didn’t just cross each other’s paths, Ricky.” Faint wrinkles on her forehead and bluish veins visible among the crow’s feet at her temples had become pronounced by her intensity. She refused to let its significance be dismissed.

“Well,” I responded light-heartedly but attacking as though this was the debate I would refuse to lose. “You must at least admit its significance was unappreciated at the time.”

“No,” she negated, but with her persistent smile. “It was real then, and it is now; we both know it. How else could it have lain dormant for all these decades and still have such force? I can feel the cold steel of the wire in that fence on my palms, Ricky, and the pain in my fingers. That was our moment. You should have clasped me in your arms and carried me out that gate with you.”

I couldn't tell how serious she was, whether she was making fun or not.

That undeterred smile had turned into a victorious chuckle; it resonated like the echoes of youthful sights and sounds of make believe in which the brave knight kidnaps the princess, and they ride off to live happily ever after. It's not a story I would be caught dead writing, but I'm not dead to its appeal.

She had me remembering how thrilled I had been on that first encounter with life on the backside of a racetrack. Although my involvement as a groom had been minor, I had sensed an emerging fullness of a life so foreign to what I had ever known. I witnessed a community that shared a common pursuit, a single aspiration. One had to immerse oneself in it to understand what might otherwise have seemed irrational. Anticipation of the 'big horse' as though waiting for Godot. That is what it was all about; the love of thoroughbred horses, either you got it, or you didn't. Sherwood Anderson said it best in his short story 'I Want To Know' that I embraced whole heartedly back then: *"If you've never been crazy about thoroughbreds, it's because you've never been around where they are much and don't know any better. They're beautiful. There isn't anything so lovely and clean and full of spunk and honest and everything as some racehorses. ...It brings a lump up into my throat when a horse runs. I don't mean all horses but some. I can pick them nearly every time. It's in my blood like in the blood of racetrack[ers] and trainers."* And no, it wasn't 'in my blood', I hadn't been born into it like Danni, but I felt it even from that limited involvement as a teenager. On The Road was special.

My mother had worried about the friends I kept and asked me once what it was about the track that I liked so much. I told her as a kid who exaggerates his importance, "You should read 'I Want To Know' by Sherwood Anderson." The story goes sideways disillusioning the kid when a major racehorse trainer he had respected proceeds to a night of debauchery following the spectacular win by his 'big horse' in a major race. I wonder now what my mother would have thought in regard to her own son when she read that part of the story. How aware would she have been of the later debauchery of her son. I think mom must have accessed the story, read it through, and pondered the extent to which it applied to me. Why else would I have found a Thoroughbred Record in among the Smithsonian and New Yorkers in the magazine rack fifty years later? I wondered also – perhaps for the first time – why I had not found even

one book I had ever written. Was that because a maid had tossed the tattered books or had there never been any? Probably the latter.

But those were background thoughts – the stuff we do when others are speaking. It's not that we're not listening, although certainly not attending as we might, and so we reach back for the current moment by responding to a question or statement, pretending to contribute to the discussion. In Danni and my conversation all these years later, my past was all coming back to me.

It felt like a return to purity; I have no other way to describe it than like the prodigal son in some ways perhaps, but horses were not my heritage like they were for Danni; hearing her experiences activated resonant yearnings to be a part of a common purpose I had not experienced in the sterile successes of my career and relationships since those pubescent days. Watching Danni as both sixteen and sixty-five was strange to me; the two were inseparable. I had never had a relationship with a woman more than halfway between those two extremes. She had wrinkles now where there had been dimples but the same wonderful, beautiful smile. I have been smitten by many women before, but this one was quite different. What she had to say was more of an integral part of her than I had ever experienced in a woman who had followed me home – there was an authenticity to her. And it did occur to me even as I watched and listened to her that the previous faults that I had blamed on other women had probably been mine instead. There is a charm much deeper than the outward beauty of woman to which I had never been so attuned.

When she began telling me about herself beyond those few brief mutual experiences, there was no egocentricity at all. In fact it was not about her at all. She turned the conversation to horses and how the thoroughbred is bred to run and what it is that results in the 'big horse' each and every race tracker yearns to be associated with, whether as it's breeder, owner, trainer, groom, or just a fan who makes wagers on the horse because he believes in her.

At some point I asked her what it is about "not all horses but some" that is so tantalizing to every horseman that Sherwood Anderson had described. She explained the three essential elements of every champion thoroughbred, their conformation, constitution, and their temperament. These all contribute nearly equally she said and proceeded to describe each of them.

“A Horse’s conformation is their build, the physical machine, whose flaws limit the horse’s performance and lead to injuries.”

My mind went back to On the Road again, the one horse of the four that I had been assigned to groom that had seemed to like me as I had liked her. She had seemed to me to be the perfect running machine. “The perfect specimen,” I said aloud, “whether equine or female homo sapiens.”

Danni frowned at my misogyny, disarming that aspect of my comment, of my nature, nudging me toward my better self.

“Straight legs,” she continued after my interruption, “maybe slightly over at the knees, daisy clippers whose hooves don’t exaggerate or waste motion as they run, the slope of the shoulder, musculature.”

She unconsciously stroked thin air as though a horse’s shoulder, the other still ruffling Jenni’s fur. It was On The Road’s shoulder I visualized beneath her palm even as her words kept stirring neurons.

“These are features that horsemen look for in a yearling paraded before them at auction sales.” Thankfully I dismissed any thoughts of a ‘catwalk’.”

“Then there is the horse’s constitution which is their internal health and vigor, whether they go off their feed when they are worked too hard, are they easy do-ers or hard do-ers, whether they are subject to colic.”

My mind commuted back the fifty years again. “On The Road never left a single oat in her bin, whereas that black gelding, I can’t recall his name – “

“Dan Crow,” Danni inserted for me. “His name was Dan Crow.”

Amazed at her memory, I continued, “Crow never cleaned up his feed and each morning I had to throw out the old feed and wash out his feed bin. He’d stand at his stall door and weave during race days. He drove me crazy.”

“He couldn’t run a lick.” Danni accused Dan Crow viciously. “Wasn’t he a cribber?”

“He won,” I defended a horse I had had a hard time liking, “once at least.”

“At the bottom by disqualification,” she laughed, still on the attack. “He was cheap, Ricky.”

It felt like I had lost the case for a client I had been paid to defend.

“Finally there’s temperament, the psychology of the horse, do they sulk, are they mean, are they too wild and violent to train properly, do they love to

run or do they have to be punished just to put out enough to train up for a race and run to win. There are horses that don't get the object of a horse race; they just like running in the pack. Some horses may amass ten or even fifteen in-the-money starts, seconds and thirds – some by noses, others by heads, or necks, whereas some horses repeatedly win those photos finishes.”

“Like On The Road,” I said, defending a winner.

“Yes. She was a nice horse.”

I knew Danni was lecturing, but I was fascinated and so I encouraged her to continue. Partly I just loved the sound of her voice and the brightness in the room with her in it. And in part because I was enthralled by her and what she was explaining. Those were fond memories that she was bringing back from the far corners of my mind where I thought they had gone to die. The sound of her voice continued even as I entertained myself with background thoughts involving her as a retired college professor now standing in front of her own proverbial plow.

“Not all those aspects need to be present in an outstanding thoroughbred. There are skeletons of champions displayed in museums that show different numbers of vertebrae for example, it's a number that varies from 51 to 58. They differ in height from fifteen hands to seventeen. Seattle Slew won the triple crown with ‘slew’ appended to his name arguably because he was ‘slew footed’; I mean he paddled when he walked to be shown at the yearling sale. He probably sold for less than he would have otherwise. Some great horses are picky eaters, or subject to illnesses and still win classic races. Some are violently mean like Nasrullah and/or nearly blind like Lexington and his sire Boston but are worth the trouble of racing and breeding them, nonetheless.”

“Just how important is pedigree do you think,” I asked, as much to keep her talking as to know. Listening to Danni's explanations, I came to realize that it wasn't just horses she understood—it was passion, perseverance, and the threads traced through a pedigree that connect the past to the present.

“It's really important,” her fingers were massaging Jenni's neck. “At the select yearling sales in Keeneland, they put out a catalogue like Sotheby's that goes three generations back – to grandparents of the sire and dam. And on the distaff side – the dam's side – they list all offspring with bold face black type of the names of the offspring who won stake races; they include the names of

all the stakes and handicap races they won or those in which they placed. You can glance at a page and estimate the price for which the yearling will sell just by how black the page is.”

“So, was your family wealthy enough to buy such well bred horses with pedigrees that improve the odds of getting a ‘big horse’.” I was feeling like a reporter questioning someone the way I had sometimes been interviewed.”

“No,” she answered, “but by knowing pedigrees and the nicks that have worked in the past...”

“Nicks?” I interrupted, playing journalist—goading her for my enjoyment.

“There are stallions whose sons match up well with the daughters of other stallions,” she explained. “The prepotent sires Nasrullah and Princequillo constituted such a famous nick that produced many great horses. So stallions by sons of Nasrullah and daughters of sons of Princequillo proved successful too.”

“Secretariat, right?”

“Yes,” she smiled at my success. “He was by Bold Ruler, who was a son of Nasrullah out of the great Princequillo mare, Somethingroyal. Nasrullah’s responsibility was to implant speed; Princequillo’s was to provide stamina. What more could one want in a race horse?”

“What are some other nicks?”

“I think nicks are just ‘outcrosses’ to attain heterogeneity with assumed added vitality in a pedigree. Ruffian was a Bold Ruler – Native Dancer cross. Gold Run was as close to that breeding as my family could afford and that was more of a fortunate accident my grandfather exploited because he recognized it as a nick.” She paused, looking off through the front window, her upper teeth on her lower lip.

“There are also approaches to inbreeding through the best offspring of a prepotent sire such as Bold Ruler.”

“Is there an example?” It was a game now; I was trying to outlast her.

“Of course, A-period P-period Indy. Probably after your time at the track, but he was extremely fashionable for a while, an excellent sire,” she said. “He was inbred four-s by three-d to Bold Ruler.” She was pushing her advantage.

“Okay, but...” I laughed, “this shouldn’t be like computer technology with hyphenated numbers and acronyms, should it? These are all living breathing animals. So, what’s the A-period P-period all about?”

“Oh, that,” she responded. “His Japanese owner named him after the Autopolis auto-racing track he had built; that’s supposedly the origin of the abbreviation. The Indy part probably just refers to the Indianapolis 500. Who cares; he’s a horse – one hell of a horse actually; his dam’ was Weekend Surprise.”

“Now there’s a nice surprise. A name with no acronym or abbreviation,” I chuckled, “but what about the R-2-D-2 inbreeding stuff?”

“Oh, you mean the four-s by three-d? It means his sire (the ‘s’) is inbred with four crosses of Bold Ruler and his dam (the ‘d’) has three.”

“Bold Ruler was a big fucking deal.”

“Yep,” she laughed, “he did it a whole lot of times and he was good at it. You had to have known that.”

As she talked, I saw the drive that must have propelled her from stables to wherever life had taken her. It wasn’t just her knowledge—it was her spirit, her intelligence. Her passionate in-depth explanation of every aspect of the thoroughbred industry awakened more than just the memories of horses I had known at the track. It revealed the hidden world behind it—one as magical as Pooch’s Hundred Acre Wood or Puff the Magic Dragon’s Honalee. It is a realm from which I had been exiled; one she seemed still to naturally inhabit.

“Danni, I love your voice, but I’m saturated with horse data; I get that a good racehorse has to have a lot of black type and champions in its pedigree somewhere if it has any hope of becoming a ‘big horse’, but...”

Danni wasn’t a quitter; she kept going like the energizer bunny. “*Every* thoroughbred pedigree is *filled* with champions; there is an intense selection process. It’s just a matter of how far back they are in the pedigree. There’s also performance. Some breeders – particularly small-time breeders who race their home bred – sacrifice fashionable breeding for stallions and mares close up in the pedigree who were creditable runners in their own right hoping to duplicate that performance. Performance has been shown to breed true.”

“Danni, enough already.” I was envisioning the girl on a pogo stick, the image that had entered my mind fifty years ago. “Can we forget about how

many Bold Rulers a horse's pedigree has hidden in there? What about your own pedigree and performance over the last fifty years? That's what I'd really like to hear right about; I don't aspire to be a horseman or a groom again."

"Really?" she replied. "That's a shame. You'd make a good groom. Did you lie about caring for horses?" A pause as wrinkles arose in her forehead; she stared at me. "So you want to know about me before hand?" she teased.

"I loved On The Road, and I think she loved me too. But enough already, I want to know about you?" I paused. "Yes, I really do."

"I do' has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" She evidently wanted me to wince and squirm, which I did for her pleasure.

"Well, I'm really not very interesting, I'm afraid. There's a lot of black type in my pedigree but they're not stakes winners. We were poor black folk from Kaintuck," she laughed, leaning back like she'd just revealed her family secret. "But you knew McGee wasn't Italian." She bounced as she got that right leg out from under her; it was probably asleep by now. Jenni roused, looking up at her in anticipation of what jolt might come next.

"No, I may be old and white-haired, but I don't think you will find any of that in me. There are the undeniable facts of my being more attracted to the beauty in a woman than her brilliance. I'll confess my behavior in that regard has been atrocious. But watching and listening to you, I see the perfect blend of beauty and brilliance. You are just who you are and I'm liking that person a whole lot."

"I knew all that about you then and now. My being black but light is just a fact that matters less than it did. White men in my pedigree fell in love with black women and I don't think a one of them ever regretted it."

"I wouldn't," just bubbled out of me like an embarrassing burp."

She jumped up, dropping Jenni to her surprise, then ran over to fall into the couch beside me, kissing me. Jenni hopped up and came after her. This was very different in an indescribable way from other women who had ever followed me home – not to this house, but the much more upscale residences of my past. They had all left, leaving the same aching hole that they had been unable to fill. I sensed that the hole was just the right size for Danni and that she was snuggling into it.

She proceeded then to tell me about her parents' backgrounds and how they had met. They had made their living training thoroughbreds to race. Her immediate upbringing had been on a small-time breeding farm and later at racetracks on a circuit that ran through several States.

It was an intriguing story that went back generations, so different from my background of parents who had lived their lives in this one spot with no ties to the past. I was still amazed that she had made contact after all these years; our overlap of common background being so small.

Eventually I asked with sincere interest, "Why would you contact a guy who you barely knew as a kid decades ago and whose background had so little in common with yours other than a single summer when he loved horses too. How sincere a love could that have been if he could walk away..." In my mind I heard On The Road whinny again as I finished my sentence with "and never looked back?"

"I walked away too, and all I regret is that you didn't take me with you. I don't think you walked away because you were tired of horses or horse racing, not of On The Road at least. I know I didn't. It was because of changes in how race horses were being considered. We're looking back together now, Ricky. We're together at last, aging adults to be sure, but with your words to express how we felt even back then."

As she continued on this so-different tack, I was still thinking wistfully of On The Road having to limit a complaint about my leaving to a single whinny.

"It is more than a mutual interest and endeavor that attracts people to each other. There's something biological that is very basic. I confess, that that is a major part of why I had to meet you again. Just to know, and yes, having met you now, I do know. I need you, Ricky... and you need me."

I could still feel the poetic tingle of her kiss and sensed where this was going—"two paths has diverged in a yellow wood," and those 'two paths converged' again and that has 'made all the difference'.

"There is bodily appeal where words become unnecessary; your physique attracted me when I first saw you; you were six-foot-whatever and all man already. I was ready to run away with you to anywhere. That may not imply forever, but it would be too dishonest to discount. It is a fact that I wanted you back then; I don't know why, but I did. Sexuality wanes at our age, but it still

exists. That has been the reason for aspects of my behavior over the years that I've refused to admit, and I hide it now beneath a whole lot of my intellectual bullshit.

“You were huge and muscular with a carefree I-don't-give-a-damn look about you back then, Ricky; you haven't ever lost that look for me. I have followed your writing and all the newspaper articles about you with photos of you and the various women to whom you must certainly have shown affection. I want to be the last of them.”

As she hugged me to her tightly, I looked up into that spider web. Maybe a little 'terrified' isn't so far off.

“I do not associate with the guy in those media accounts,” I pleaded.

“I know. They didn't report the guy I knew.” She paused, looking at me now and kissing me on the cheek so softly that it could have been a butterfly. “But I admit to being very jealous of those women. It's not just loneliness; I've been lonesome since I was ten. I don't know why I want you so badly, Ricky, but I do; I need you – desperately. *That's* why I contacted you.”

She had already convinced me that it was me who needed her. And so, after long years of longing, we each seemed to have found what had been missing.

Across the room Danni slept comfortably. Jennifer was snuggled up beside her where I had risen, her head on my pillow. A recollection of what I had heard somewhere about why cheetahs had never been domesticated, kept me from sleeping longer. The reason being that the female of that species must run the equivalent of seventy miles before she is ready to mate. It was not easy for me to dismiss the metaphors and analogies that are my stock in trade.

The novel for which I was on contract and had been writing had become so boring to me in comparison to Danni's life story that it proceeded to slide on into the past. I had reiterated too many times in my mind what Danni had related to me in the hours before we had gone to bed and finally slept; I had to get some of the snarls out of what she had said so we could proceed to unravel the rest, of which she had only touched the surface. And so I began at once to transcribe.

“Now ‘Sam McGee was from Tennessee where cotton rolls and blows’, but Danni McGee was from Keeneland, Kentucky known for its sales of the world’s finest thoroughbred yearlings,” I wrote and continued, “The sales attract the wealthiest of the wealthy from all over the world who invest spare millions of dollars hoping that one day one of their purchases will return even a fraction of their cost in purse monies, personal glory, and/or breeding fees. But for me Keeneland is primarily known as the place where Danni McGee was born.

“Danni’s father Henry McGee hailed from Lexington and ran a string of racehorses at tracks throughout the Midwest with considerable success, having taken over a successful stable from his father. His training abilities were recognized by those who knew what they were doing in the business and recommended his services to prospective owners. He mostly dealt with claiming horses, impugned as ‘platers’, but that was only because his clients could not afford select yearlings. He did occasionally win a stake race with a Cinderella, but more usually higher claims and allowance races were his forte for which he would be recommended. His meeting Danni’s mother Mildred, Milly as she was called, occurred during the 1958 Spring Meet at the Keeneland racetrack. She asked Henry whether he needed a groom but what he would tell anyone who asked about how they had met was that his response had been that he actually needed a bride. They were married when he returned for the Fall Meet later that same year. Following their marriage Milly’s background fused so well with the operation for which no duty was beyond her capabilities that she and her husband’s business became a prosperous partnership. Danni was the product of that partnership.

“Milly had been born and raised on a small farm a few miles further west of Keeneland. Her father was a small-time thoroughbred breeder and racehorse trainer whose wife, although they were not legally entwined was black and beautiful. The blackness was the reason there had been no paperwork associated with the union, but it was as secure as the Good Lord binds such things he would tell anyone who had the audacity to ask. It was just the way things were in Kentucky back then, neither his fault nor the Good

Lord's and he felt way more honorably American about his situation than Thomas Jefferson ever could have. Theirs was a love thing.

“There was stigma growing up in Kentucky in a racially mixed household, but Mildred's personal charm overcame it all in the classroom and with her school mates, whose parents were the only impediment to an easy childhood. One of her classmate's fathers, a mister Hogan, had once referred to her as ‘poontang’ in her presence and the n-word was a prevalent adjective in discourse throughout the region. But she was not dark like her mother and outside of her hometown she was not just ‘accepted’, she was welcome anywhere.

“Danni was born the next year, and although her Facebook page indicates she's ‘from’ Keeneland, Kentucky, she was born in a tack room at the Prairie Meadows track in Altoona, Iowa in the outskirts of Des Moines. She had been scheduled to arrive somewhat later when her parents were scheduled to be in Lexington, but sometimes things just happen when they happen. Having indicated that she is ‘from’ Keeneland states that not only is she from Lexington, Kentucky, she was born enmeshed in thoroughbred racing. It should not be concluded that her arrival was not a big deal because it occurred ‘on the road’. It was indeed a big deal on both sides of her family but as soon as she could walk, the McGee caravan was on the road again.”

I had been writing a while and whether with the emotion Danni had found lacking or not, I have never been a fast writer. My process includes long gaps in thought, some googling, and a lot of redoing. I knew that most of what I wrote this night would be redone or thrown out, but it got me in the mood so to speak. I glanced over at the bed where Danni and Jenni had slept without moving for several hours, the window shade was now a light tan. I could hear noises of a city shifting into its business mode behind them. Then I noticed that although still, Danni's deep brown eyes were wide and twinkling.

“Good morning,” she said and that seemed to make the sun itself jump to attention such that the blank tan of the window took on a bright yellowish tint in the early morning light. Danni jumped too, right out of the bed shocking Jennifer, and was at my side looking over at my laptop.

Yawning as she pecked my cheek, she daid, “Let me read it.”

“Well, it’s not...”

“Yes, it is. I want to read it.”

“... intended to be in the book. It’s just ... like notes.” But she had with her uncanny agility replaced me in my desk chair; I was now the spectator.

She had just begun before spinning back around confused. “Who in the hell is Sam McGee anyway and what pray tell does he have to do with me?” But she had turned back around to proceed through my night’s offering.

As I headed for the kitchen I yelled back, “Have you never heard of ‘the night on the marge of Lake Labarge where I cremated Sam McGee’?”

“Is this a cremation then...” I heard as I disappeared into the kitchen to get some coffee brewing.

Jennifer was by my side looking up at me expectantly and I think she had a bit of a smirk as she waited for me to get the new can of chow opened and spooned into her dish with the dry food and dash of milk. She seemed to me to have perked up a bit from her usual resigned but contented expression. I had just got the coffee into the paper strainer and was pouring in the twelve cups of water when I heard Danni.

“Do you drink that much coffee in a day?”

She would take some getting used to, I noted, but I knew also that I had never really gotten used to any of the women who had populated my various residences.

“Don’t you drink?” I asked.

“Yes, of course I drink. I’m a race tracker and I use a lot of pepper. But not six cups.”

“Well, good,” I responded. “Maybe I won’t have to make a new pot for lunch.”

She laughed. It was wonderful having laughter in this old house.

I opened the cupboard that housed my cereal. “Wheaties or Cheerios?”

“Cheerios,” she said. “The breakfast of equine champions.”

“Well, I guess it’s just me and Bruce Jenner then.”

“No!” she exclaimed, “Please no.”

“No,” I affirmed to her jolly approval. “I can’t change that drastically.”

“What you’ve written is true, but...” It was more like a concession than applause.

“Where’s the emotion? Is that what you’re thinking? Like maybe you’ve assigned this task to the wrong dude. Being valued higher than the entire Keeneland Sales establishment doesn’t hit the knock down price for your offered product?” I teased.

“It does,” and then after a bit she rose to come around the table for a kiss. I pulled her down onto my lap where I held her until she said, “My coffee’s getting cold.”

As she sat down again, Jennifer looked up at her admiringly. Danni reached down to pet her and asked, “Why would you name a dog Jennifer?”

“Well, first of all, she isn’t my dog.”

“Oh, really,” she scoffed. “Then whose dog is she?”

“She belonged to a neighbor who died before my Dad, and the neighbors decided that Dad needed a dog, so they placed her in his care. Ultimately that became my care. She is part of the reason I’m still here. I have to figure out what to do with her after I sell the place.”

“Take her with you.”

“I travel light.”

“She isn’t heavy.”

“She’s a pain in the ass. I can’t even open the blind or she barks up a blue streak every time they take that damned mastiff for a walk.”

“A ‘blue streak’? I have to see that.” She was laughing at me now. “You should let them sniff each other’s butt – problem solved,” more laughing. “So she came with the name Jennifer?”

“No.”

“Well what was it?”

Exasperated, I replied, “I don’t effing know, okay. When I arrived Dad just called her The Dog as in ‘why don’t you walk The Dog?’”

Danni just kept laughing. “So you named her Jennifer yourself. Why?”

“You don’t want to know,” was all I would say until she had cajoled it out of me. Finally I had to confess that “my last quasi relationship wasn’t good; I decided The Dog, however annoying she was, was more my style than... so I gave her an appropriate female name.”

“And the name of that ex had been Jennifer?”

God! “Yeah.”

“The sex must have been pretty good,” she laughed. “As I recall, there was an article...” she glanced over at me and stopped laughing abruptly, mercifully letting it go. Then, after a brief pause and no more hilarity, she recovered with, “I’ll bet your next dog will be named Danni...” she paused again. “Or Danielle.” She watched me carefully.

“Jennifer is the last time I will assign a woman’s name to a dog. Jenni didn’t deserve that.” Looking into Danni’s eyes before she had averted them, I could tell that she hadn’t been certain whether I was referring to the dog or the woman; I was a bit shaky on that issue myself. She was stroking Jenni’s muzzle so I said, “I think she would like you to adopt her, and you can call her whatever you like.”

“I’ve never been settled enough to have a dog, but Jennifer, you are now my dog.”

That concluded the first 24 hours of forever and ever. But it kept on going like the tick, tick, tock of a clock and getting better with more certainty of the next ticks and tocks than any relationship I had ever been in, if one could even have called them relationships. Her either, I half suspected – except for Johnny.

Time just kept on ticking away like the drip drip drip of my faucet that I had never fixed until one day I walked into the kitchen to see Danni laid out on her back under the sink.

“Hand me that thing,” she demanded. So I grabbed the ‘thing’, a pipe wrench as it turned out, and very soon there were no more drips but thankfully the ticks have kept on coming.

We could talk and look up facts together for hours about her ancestry that seemed increasingly relevant to who she was, what she had become. My own ancestry had always seemed to have no more relevance to me than the first chapter of Genesis, with as many unanswered questions. Her ancestry on the other hand had no such gaping holes or unanswered questions. Many of the answers were strange, but they all made sense. And there was a name to plug into the hole. I was getting to know the ‘tiny’ girl who had watched a disaster in the making right beside our eyes and I liked her a lot.

She had a few photos in her purse – not many, but enough with her commentary to give me a glimpse of the personality of Milly McGee nee Howard and the toxic Gunderson family relationship. I found out that Danni had endured the tragic deaths of her father Henry McGee and husband Johnny O’Neill, the details of both of which I had yet to learn. Horses like Gold Afloat, Rabbit Run, Gold Run, and Manny O’Mar seemed somehow integral to any story of her family. There were also, mostly unnamed, badass boys, men, and women she had encountered along the way. I was still in the dark about these encounters.

She laughed and cried demonstrating how a life can be filled with joy and sorrow, the real substances of life. Without directly telling me, she made me realize that I had been an observer on the outside, watching life from behind the protection of a fence and then invariably walking away, never participating in what I saw. My life had been spent writing snippets of what I had seen from behind the protection of a fence. She had been in the middle of things with no fence between. And thus, often as we talked, I became aware of how tiny my life had been without her and how wonderfully full it was becoming.

Chapter Three: Kaintuck!

“The Blue Ridge Mountains skipped Kentucky almost entirely, separated by the Great Valley, but then extended on into the Appalachen-Hochebene (Appalachian Plateau) sloping west from the main Appalachian Mountain chain and its ripples through the hollers extending west to central Kentucky, Ohio, and Illinois. Danni’s dark great grandmother on her mother’s side was descended from slaves who had been brought across the ridges of the Appalachians through the Cumberland Gap from Tennessee by the notorious but legendary Irish-born Hugh McGary and his clan. How much hot-tempered McGary and how much African warrior blood ran through Sadie’s veins was impossible to tell because that was the way things were back then. Sadie was afraid of no one but the haints of the hollers because of which the ceiling of one’s porch must be painted blue to ward them off the way water would. Milly knew why the ceiling of her porch was blue because that too had become the way things were, and she appreciated any available protection from the ghosts of long dead slave traders.

“William, Dani’s great grandfather on that side was said to have had slave blood flowing in his veins as well but he had been so nearly white that upon adoption an escaped Hind family slave could become a Howard family member in good standing. Folks said the Howards was color blind and that too was just the way things were or weren’t. William saw quality in Sadie McGary however bold and boisterous she could be; they became one without a wedding because that was the way things had to be done in Kentucky back then. Together they had several children including Danni’s grandmother Maybelle who by combinatorial randomness was the darkest of the litter as she explained it to Danni’s mother Milly, and ‘it don’t make no difference no how honey’; Milly should not let it bother her none neither. ‘That there mister Hogan, he come from a long list of Hogans from way back and they hain’t none of ‘em worth a lick so let ‘im rot in hell darlin.’

“Milly’s father Daniel’s background was a little more obscure primarily because there wasn’t an equivalent of a Sadie or a Maybelle anywhere among the Hites. They were propertied people that had basically been transplanted

from the Shenandoah valley from whence they had headed west to their promised land up somewhere around Hickman Creek south of Lexington. They had originally founded a big spread there at the margin between the inner and outer bluegrass regions and had some appreciable history with thoroughbred breeding and racing, with later generations settling further east out near Richmond. Daniel's father had a prosperous farm out in Madison county east of Richmond, nearer to where Waco is today.

“The Howards lived fairly close by the Hites on their littler farm up north of Irvine in Estill county in the eastern ridges of the Pottsville escarpment where they raised some hogs for market but also bred a horse or two with lesser pedigrees for pony horses and occasionally leased out nurse mares to a larger thoroughbred breeder who had lost a mare in foaling or needed their stallion as a teaser. It was on such an occasion of the Hites having lost one of their best mares, that they sent Daniel to ride over to the Howards to secure a nurse mare. While at the farm he noticed Maybelle helping with the arrangement since William was off shoeing horses which was as close as he came to a day job. Daniel was invited to stay for a meal before heading back home across the river leading a mare, but not till after he had fallen desperately in love with Maybelle. He became a frequent visitor thereafter and eventually gave up his birthright to earn Maybelle's hand in unsanctioned mixed matrimony. William having personal familiarity with the adoption procedures offered an adoption option to Daniel who was now disowned by his own family. He and the Good Lord accepted and sanctioned the marriage of two souls now named Howard.

“Daniel began training a few horses for some friends who had bought Hite horses from his father but liked the way Daniel handled horses to say nothing of his training fees costing them less, so that was how he and Maybelle made ends meet. He also did some shoeing after they had moved to a little farm between Pisgah and Zion Hill close to the Keeneland track. That is where Danni's mother Mildred (Milly) was born. The rent on the farm was raised for an unexplained reason, so they moved back to the Howard farm. This was after William had died suddenly and Sadie needed unacknowledged but necessary help in running the farm.

“The McGees were something else. Samual had marauded northward up from Tennessee on horseback with a band of war criminals after the civil war, enriching himself on the way and finally settling near Louisville, taking a farm and its widow as his natural right. The violence in this strain mellowed somewhat in generations thereafter, but not a lot. After the third or fourth generation we come finally to ‘Mac’, whose name was actually Donald. His mother always called him Mac because she was irritated with her husband for writing Donald on his birth certificate (which one can understand) when she had clearly told him she wanted the baby named McDonald after her side of the family. The name ‘Henry’ also derives from the distaff side of his pedigree, his mother having been a Clay, revered the great compromiser who preferred being right to being president. She was proud of her son who was as generous and high born as people come in Kentucky back then. He was determined but not belligerent. He wouldn’t back down from what he was convinced was right, but he could be persuaded to change any position if showed the data. It made him an even better horse trainer than his forebears.”

That was the information on which Danni had elaborated during our first few days following the fifty hiatus. I guessed, if my accepted responsibility in this emerging relationship was to be writing her story, I had better get started. So that was a start. But more than the start of a story, I visualized the DNA mapping of a genotype being expressed all these generations as phenotypical beauty and behavior in a protagonist I had briefly witnessed as a real live girl fifty years ago and the vibrant mature woman I was coming to know.

I hadn’t noticed her return to the bedroom; she had been puttering around in the kitchen when I last filled my coffee cup; the doorway between is out of sight behind my big screen. She had evidently squeezed in between the far end of my desk and the file cabinet in the dimly lit room. My first awareness of her was the fragrance of bread dough; I had heard the oven close—not a sound I’ve heard in this house. She must have put something in the oven for supper later. I had noticed when I had been in the kitchen that she had on one of my mom’s aprons. All of this was new to me.

I guess she had been looking at what I had been writing for a little while when she asked, “What are you doing?” She was leaning over my shoulder

reading what I had just written. “You are filling in all the Black type in my pedigree, aren’t you?” She didn’t seem completely comfortable with what I had written, and I’m not used to being edited on the fly.

“Yep. There is a lot of it in there, isn’t there—just like any other well-bred Thoroughbred. I’m just getting on with what I thought you asked me to do, lining you up for the select sale,” I responded, “except for some extra geological filler that I had to look up on my own. I thought that was what you told me you wanted. And, in case you wondered, I’m enjoying it.”

“You’re what I wanted; the writing was just an excuse to catch a writer. I just suggested the topic for if you saw significance, or had an interest, in our story as an author.” After a pause and staring off for a bit, she added, “Being ‘lined up for auction’ wasn’t exactly what I or black women would want in case you haven’t thought about that.” Then, “And I’m not anxious to play the heroine or villain of a story. I just want to be with you as who I am.”

“I do see significance in the story and I’m seeing more all the time. I am sorry for that thoughtless comment. I didn’t think about how ‘lining you up for sale’ might sound to you. I didn’t mean anything by it. But is it alright if I want to write your story? You’re my heroine in case you have any doubt.”

“I will be the pretentious Danni McGee if you want me to be,” she smiled that smile, “but it’s *our* story.” Then after a pause. “You’re convinced I’m related to your friend Sam McGee now, aren’t you?”

“Nah. Just a bit of fun; he was just an artifact in a far-fetched yarn about the Klondike I happen to like. But Samuel? I don’t know. Maybe.”

“So maybe Danni McGee is just such an artifact... or a marauder,” she laughed, mimicking what I had written. It was an intriguing idea,

But without segue she asked, “How well did you know Riley?”

The change of venue was so abrupt that I was somewhat taken aback. “I don’t know; how well does anyone know anyone?”

“I think I know you and I’m sure you’re getting to know everything there is to know about me. So you had to have known that Riley and I were an item for a while. What else did you know about him?”

“He was really good at throwing a football.”

“What the hell, Ricky! That’s how you think you know someone? I would say that yours is a pretty minimalist view of existentialism. You make

me wonder what you might consider my existential virtue that would be analogous to Riley's 'throwing a football'. I'm afraid I know."

Ignoring her allusion, I clarified, "Okay, so I had good hands, which made me his favorite target for those footballs. We won a lot of games, and I guess that was the primary rationale for our being friends. I never knew his favorite book if he had one or his favorite TV program, if that's what you want to know. I knew you were 'his' which was why you couldn't ever be 'mine'. I don't want to ever see him again in case you wondered, and I would really like it if you were to want me instead."

She smiled, "You do have good hands," and as she left the room with Jennifer following, the echoes of, "I *always* wanted you instead" was left hanging in the air like the refrain of a new favorite song.

But having finished with some of the backfill I was ready to move on with the story, and if I were to continue at this rate creeping up through generations sequentially, this would turn into a very bleak and boring historical narrative about what should be an exhilarating story of a woman I found so fascinating. So I got up from my desk and walked into the kitchen to do some more basic research.

She was making sandwiches; the baking must be for later. I announced my entry by asking, "What do I need to know about Danni McGee and Riley Gunderson?"

"Oh my God!" was what she said without turning around. "We're already coming to the section that the teenage boys will read?"

"If need be," was all I could say to that. I could smell a hint of cinnamon in what was baking. "Is that cinnamon rolls in the oven?"

"Yes, do you like cinnamon rolls? We can have some after supper."

I noticed that the venetian blind over the kitchen sink was open. She had probably opened it before, but this was the first time it dawned on me why everything was so bright in here anymore.

"Let's have some lunch," she said as she took one of the sandwiches over to the breakfast nook. It was bright there too; the blind behind the table had been raised. I grabbed the other sandwich and sat down across from her.

"So, you want to know about the McGee-Gunderson connection."

“This is sounding like a bit more than just Riley,” which I had wondered about way back before the time we demarcate as ‘the event at the fence’ and now, during this brief interlude since renewing and reinforcing whatever we might have had before and seem definitely to have now.

Then out of the blue she asked, “Why didn’t *you* like me back then?”

“What do you mean? I wasn’t about to horn in on my best friend’s romance; it’s something I wouldn’t ever allow myself to do. Not ever.”

“So why was I *his* romance and not yours? Shouldn’t I have had a choice in that?”

“Because when I first saw you—I can’t even say ‘met’ you because we didn’t meet. It was clear to me at the outset that you and he were together; he told me that before I ever saw you and it was clear from the fact that he didn’t officially introduce us. Of course it should have been your choice; I like your choice now.”

“Yes, me too, but we’re mid-sixties! It’s a fucking shame don’t you think?” She seemed angry and trembled uncomfortably.

“I do, yeah.”

“I made my choice back then you know.”

“No. I didn’t know; how could I have known?”

“Duh! Why do you think I was up at the fence alone with you in my hour of desperation?”

“Danni, I grabbed you in the restaurant to keep you from leaving because I finally got it! Fifty years late – alright. I get it; I really get it. But I didn’t get it then. What else can I say? I’m a dumb shit – always have been. Okay?”

“Well what were you thinking up there at the fence with this yearning damsel right there with you?” She heaved a sigh and then gave a sad chuckle. “That I hadn’t known you were there? You were why I went up there.” Tears were appearing at the corners of her eyes now, one crawling down her cheek.

“Danni... Danni, I went up there because I had a bad feeling about that race; I didn’t want to watch that race in a crowd. I had watched Ruffian break down when I was in a crowd up in the kitchen and a kid can’t cry in crowd in the kitchen at a racetrack. And when the starting bell rang and you started yelling, I was totally surprised. I looked down and there you were and the thought that impressed me was, ‘She’s so tiny.’ That was all I could think.”

“I wasn’t tiny! You’re just fucking big; you were huge. How tall were you back then? I had turned sixteen and I wasn’t small except next to you; I had big boobs!” She gave a jaded smile but there were still tears.

“I was six four; on a racetrack that’s huge; I get it. But you were fucking beautiful – big boobs and all. I think the ‘tiny’ that struck me at the time had more to do with the weight of what we were watching and how heavy it must have been for you – a poorly understood feeling of empathy. We are together now. I’ve served a life sentence for that stupidity for Christ’s sake.”

Appeased, with no new tears welling up, the one on her cheek having dropped, she said softly: “Thank you for that, Ricky. It seems too excessive as punishment to hand down to a couple of stupid kids who won’t ever have the stupid kids we should have had.” Then we ate our sandwiches in silence, Danni offering Jennifer bites of the lunchmeat from hers.

As she took away our plates and I sipped what was left of my coffee, she brought Gunderson back into the conversation: “I had been an item with Riley for a few months before he brought you to the track, and yes, we did have sex, so you don’t need to wonder about that or with whoever else I might have had it with. But from the time I first saw you, you were all I wanted – what I’ve needed ever since.”

“What about Johnny O?”

She showed a little surprise at my using the ‘O as she had in our earlier conversation about the incident when we were at the fence. I could sense that Johnny was a very complicated piece of the puzzle of Danni McGee. All she said was, “We have to get rid of the Gundersons first.”

“Plural?”

“Yes, plural. Me and my ma didn’t always make rational decisions.”

“None of us do,” I seconded, “but I see another story.”

“Riley’s father was the original asshole. When he was out of town, he was footloose and free as a bird. When Mom first landed at Bay Meadows with a couple of horses, Jess helped her get her horses bedded down and thought that justified bedding her down as well. I’m guessing this, and that she succumbed once, probably not right off, but I don’t know. I do know she hated him by the time I arrived a few weeks later.

One time I was watching when my mom was walking across the track to saddle one of her horses. Jess was in the gap with a couple other trainers and I heard him say, ‘Now there goes some good poontang.’ I didn’t ever tell her because I thought she might kill him if I did, and I didn’t want to lose her. I knew she hated him, and I don’t think she slept around. If she did, she was a hell of a lot more discrete about it than I was. But that was the situation that had me backing off Riley; my dad used to say acorns don’t fall far from the tree. That incident was just a week or so before you and I met at the fence.”

As she was talking, I was remembering Gunderson bragging about his ‘poontang’ girl, with me not knowing what the word even meant. When I first set eyes on Danni afterward, I thought ‘poontang’ must be slang for ‘colored’ and I wasn’t nearly as appalled as I should have been.

“So are we rid of the Gundersons for good then?” I asked.

“Nowhere near,” she said.

“What’s next then?”

“Gold Run,” she said.

“Did Riley sneak inside information for his dad?”

“Yes.”

“What you may have told him or what he clandestinely got himself?”

“Probably both, but more than that, because of what Riley told him, Jess worked on Gold Run’s owner to switch trainers. He told the owner that, he had inside information that Gold Run was sound and should be running more often, which was the opposite of the truth. Mom and I both felt like it was my fault because I let Riley come down our shed row besides talking with him.”

“Oh. You know, I meant to ask you before whether your mom was still around.”

“No. She died quite a few years ago.” She hesitated and looked away for a moment, but stepped right into it, “She killed herself.”

“What?” I was shocked, in part by the casual tone with which she had finally appended the suicide. “How long ago?”

“A long time ago.” She provided no more information on the situation or the cause, seeming to push it back even further in time. It was clear that she didn’t want to talk about it. I waited to respond, wondering how to go about it, but she continued before I had even formulated a question. “It was a long-

term thing ever since my dad died. I think she stayed alive until she figured she had me settled or gave up trying.”

“Were there multiple attempts?” I asked but shouldn’t have.

“No, but I knew she was depressed; she had been taking antidepression medicine as long as I can remember... but I’m sure it was only after Dad died, trying to get me situated in a way that would have pleased him.”

“After you got your degrees?”

“Around that time, yeah.”

“While you were working at the Pegasus Clinic?”

“Uh huh,” she nodded. “After she considered her job done.”

“You were an O’Neill by then?”

“I was an O’Neill well before that but not long after.”

I was getting information, but it wasn’t flowing. The image of her that Johnny O had painted was of a woman who looked nearly her age now and I sensed that that had been a long time ago. She responded to my questioning with a series of facts. What had happened to her requirement for emotion in this tale? Even about her mother she had responded with facts.

“Danni, this Q and A thing isn’t working. Can we start at the beginning?” I slid my arm around her, my palm on the small of her back under her blouse. “I want to hear it all, not just facts. Could we lay down and relax while you lay it all out for me?”

“How do you think that will play out?” she questioned; her broad smile was emphasized by the dimple in the wrinkle on each side.

“The way any great story should,” I said, “with a little passion.”

That story did not start up again until dusk, by then the stage had been set and the mood was right. When I opened my eyes, she was staring at me with a wonderful expression of calm. “Are you ready for birth of Danni McGee?”

“Much readier than your parents had been apparently.” I was wide awake and listening.

“Well...” she smiled, “I was a bit early – a couple of weeks, I think. Mom was cleaning out a stall when I started dog paddling toward the light.” Jenni had her chin on Danni’s hip looking across at me with an expression that seemed for all the world like a cat having eaten the canary. “Dad heard her moan as he was tacking up a horse and came running; he took her to the cot in

the tack room.” Pausing then, she inserted, “This isn’t first-hand knowledge you realize, but I know what that cot felt like; I slept on that one on many a summer night. And the clutter in our tack rooms and all the noises of the stable, grooms and riders peeking in or coming in to get a bridle. Can you imagine?”

“Yes, I can imagine, and I know you were unaware of being there,” I responded, “but I’d say you have the flow of what happened about right.”

The rhyme of ‘right’ may have triggered something in the mind of the one I was getting to know better than I know my own. “Should you be up at your desk to write this down—keyboard, or whatever you call what you do?”

“No. What I do now is hold you. We’re going to get emotion into this story from the start. I won’t forget what you tell me. I’ll dabble with the words later.”

“I don’t think there were any other problems with my popping in early. Obviously major changes were made right off, but they had planned to return to Keeneland before long anyway, so they just packed up the caravan a little earlier than they would have otherwise. I think they were happy to have me.”

I squeezed her a little tighter and Jennifer looked over at her when she paused, getting her ear rubbed on both sides between a thumb and two sleek fingers. Those two were hitting it off.

“Grampa and grandma Howard put us up during the fall meet and I think Mom stayed there without helping Dad at the track during the entire meet as I recall them saying. I have glimpses of memories of grandma; I think her blackness was what I remember. Or maybe it was from later times when my parents were at Keeneland meets in subsequent years; they would leave me there during the day and sometimes a couple days at a time. It was a good place. Grandpa still shod horses at a training track and he trained one or two of his homebred two-year-olds hoping they would get claimed or else selling them privately, I think. Grandma took care of the animals on the farm when he was working, and I tagged along behind her and collected the banty eggs around the yard; it was Easter every day. Great grandma Sadie was there; she stayed in bed some days, but sometimes she cooked. I don’t think she liked me very much, but grandma said it was just because she was hurting. She was very old by then, so I suppose that was it. She didn’t get around very well.

“After the Keeneland Fall meet we stayed there on the farm. Dad and grampa added on to the stables and built a house where we lived; it was close enough to grampa and gramma’s that I could run over to be with gramma any time. Mom worked with the men on framing up the building. When that was done, she painted—first the blue ceiling of the porch before she finished the rest of the house. The blue on that porch ceiling was a thing Sadie insisted on and it was easier to do it than hear about not having done it. Then mom did ‘women’s’ work in the house and cared for the recuperating racing stock in the stable. My earliest memories are of her holding me and talking to the horses.”

She stopped the biographical data then, suggesting we should have supper that was topped off by the cinnamon rolls.

Chapter Four: One For the Road

“Race trackers are nomads indirectly affected by the climatic conditions of the tracks along their circuit – south in the fall, back north in the spring. There is a rhythm to it. But there is a punctuated stop in the dead of winter when you go home to rest your horses and reset, like a deep sigh after a long tiring day. Injuries need to be healed with poultices, casts, operations to remove bone chips from knees, sometimes a horse might be strung up in a hammock hung from ceiling beams to reduce the weight on its legs. It was a veterinary infirmary with regular visits from vets providing the stuff to create dreams of someday becoming a vet yourself.

“A stable is different in winter with the horses in their stalls more hours in the longer nights. Steam raises from the manure and urine into the cold night air; the smells are strong. Cleaning out stalls becomes a larger percentage of the work, wheeling out a wheelbarrow along the planks laid on the manure pile to keep a tire from sinking in, then dumping the load off the edge of the pile, the whole pile steaming from fermentation. After the new year foaling starts, waking up and walking out through the cold dark midnight hours to the barn to make sure a mare isn’t giving birth, helping her if she is. This starts as soon as possible because every foal born in the calendar year becomes a year older at New Years. So later in January or February if a mare comes in heat she must be bred to the local stallion or sent to the neighboring farm to be bred to their stallion. All those smells and extra work don’t offend a horseman.

“Race trackers don’t take normal summer vacations. So winters become their primary family get together time; parents are home with their school-age children. These children don’t ask Santa for a pony for Christmas; they ride racehorses. These winter holidays with breath in the air like a cloud or your tongue sticking to the frost on a window were wonderful times for Danni and her extended families on both her mom’s and dad’s side; there were no family feuds.

“For Danni school began during peak activities at Keeneland in the fall. She would miss the out-of-town Spring meets other than some weekends at Keeneland in the spring. She loved school and her mother Milly, grandmother

Maybelle, and great grandmother Sadie took extreme pride in assuring she did her homework, helping her when she needed it, and encouraging her always; her education was very important to everyone in the family, and she excelled. So Danni's childhood was defined by horses and homework. Her family's emphasis on academics saw her blossom in school and set her up to excel in her later years. But her heart belonged to the track and the trails out through the woods and down to the slow-moving Kentucky river where she loved to ride. Sometimes Jameson a kid who worked for her grandfather would walk along beside her with his fishing pole. She would tie her horse's reins to a tree and sit down beside Jameson grabbing the slithering catfish to put in his creel. She adored Jameson in the way kids love each other and the tomboy freedom of her life,

“She would join her parents on the road for the summer meets, picking up additional responsibilities each year. She learned to ride long before she was old enough for school and rode through the wooded hills with great pleasure as a child. That western edge of the Cumberland plateau has the most diverse forests in all of North America, the short-leaf pine, oak, dogwood, and beech. Sometimes in the off season she would ride with her mother or father or both. Sometimes Daniel and/or Maybelle or Jameson would ride out with her.

“She learned the ins and outs of horse breeding; she watched as stallions mounted mares and she helped foals being delivered. She loved the life she had been born into and tomboy style of her life growing up. At some point long before she started school, Henry had begun calling her his little Ruffian; a name that stuck. Later at school it became Ruff, but it didn't follow her out west.”

I had sat my laptop on the yellow Formica tabletop in the breakfast nook and had written there for some time after our supper while she was cleaning up and before she settled down across from me thumbing through an issue of the ‘Thoroughbred Record’ that had laid around the house for years. It had been in a magazine rack from which neither it nor any of the ‘Smithsonians’ or ‘New Yorkers’ had been touched for years.

“So what's the racing news,” I asked, searching for an entry.

She laughed. “I used to read this rag religiously.”

“The only way it should be read,” I said, “That’s been here pushing fifty years.” I laughed with her as I twisted my laptop around on the slick yellow surface. “But do you want to see if this sounds anything like what you told me? Am I heading down the right track?”

She sat the open magazine face down on the table beside my laptop and proceeded to read my continuation of her account. When she had read it, she looked off avoiding my expectancy. “Could we go for a walk or something? I’m feeling a little cooped up.”

I hopped up. “Sure. It doesn’t look too cold out. A dog door would be nice for Jennifer, but I think she’d like company on a dog walk in particular. I’ve not been doing any with her.”

“I know,” Danni said. “I’ve been taking her out for her constitutionals while you are reliving my life.”

I wondered about her inuendo as I grabbed a bag, and we were on our way, Jennifer sniffing the corner of every object by which we walked.

“Is this the way you remember your neighborhood growing up?” Danni asked after about a block of checking out the single-story rundown houses in the neighborhood; some of the garage doors were open with no room inside for the cars that line the street. There are offensive hip hop emanations above the hum and buzz of more distant street noise. A dog’s barking echoed from a house where the curtains remained tightly drawn.

“I would have to say that your house is the class of this neighborhood what with roman brick and all, it’s a castle.” She was laughing at my situation as she had so often in the few days since we had reacquainted.

“It is.” I skipped a step looking down after tripping on the raised uneven section of the sidewalk. “It’s class,” I defended.

“Don’t you have another place? Malibu, maybe?” She glanced over to see my reaction. “Surely you are a lot better off than your neighbors?”

“I don’t know, they’re good neighbors. Some of ‘em lived here when I was a kid, others are kids of the kids I knew as a kid.” I watched my step and what I said now. “I remember when they put this sidewalk in; it was level.”

“Didn’t Riley live around here somewhere?”

“Yeah. A street over. I chose not to walk you by there.”

“Afraid it would bring back fond memories?”

“Maybe for you, but not for me. I knew you were over there sometimes.”

“I was, but there is not one fond memory.” Then out of the blue, “Why do you live here?”

I bent down to bag up a deposit Jennifer had made. “I don’t.”

“It sure as hell looks to me like you do.” She flashed her gotcha smile.

“I came up here a few months ago to help my dad. Okay? Now that he’s dead, I intend to fix it up to sell, but I haven’t had the gumption to do it yet.”

“Yet?”

“Well... at all. That’s just not something I do and when I look around, I think the house is better than any of the neighbor’s houses, so whoever would buy it would like it how it is. So why polish a turd?”

She grimaced. “It’s comfortable. So why don’t you sell it as-is?”

“Yeah, well. Maybe it suits my personality to mope in it for a while.”

“No it doesn’t; you ought to read some of the books by Richard O’Hare – that guy must hang with the elite. I’ll bet he lives in Malibu in the summers and Aspen all winter.”

“Yeah, right! That asshole.” She was starting to bug me. “Did he write about Dick and Jane and their dog Spot? Is he writing about us?” I mocked.

“You’re not being very nice about my favorite author in the world.”

“You must not get out much or be much of a reader.”

“I am,” she contradicted sternly. “I read all the time and especially all the books O’Hare has ever written, although he hasn’t published anything new in a long time, so maybe he’s different now.”

I stopped, doggie bag in hand staring at her back with Jennifer on the leash beside her looking back anxiously now. This was seeming like what had ruined previous relationships.

She stopped abruptly then too, stepping aside as a skateboarder with his pants evidently hanging by some hidden suspender or other support flashed by. Then she turned back toward me and once again out of the blue yonder came up with, “You do some painting, don’t you?”

I didn’t answer so she continued.

“If you plan on painting me in the nude like you did Jennifer, you’re going to have to be naked when you do it.”

My forehead must have furrowed as people's do in crass situations and underneath the furrows, there were furious neurons and synapses colliding and rapidly forming new chaotic patterns of thought.

"What?" I was stunned. "Yeah. So I grew up here, but I was gone a long time before coming back. The structures are still the same, but the paint is cracked and mildewed, but that is not the substantive change; the change is that there's no one left. No people. No conversations across fences. It's like a scene in a Steven King novel where the protagonist walks into town, guns drawn but there's no one in the place to shoot but the holographic zombies whispering in the wind. I'm sort of lost to tell you the truth Danni. Richard O'Hare is on contract to fill this town or any similar town with a bit of life, but he can't find any signs of it anywhere past, or future. His books have no emotions which is what you observed. He is not a painter; he is not creative. He writes what he sees and hears, embellishes it a little. That's it. Why me?"

"I didn't and I wouldn't ever have said any of that about Richard O'Hare, Ricky. I am not a zombie. Maybe each of us has a life we can find deep down within our past and future." She paused long enough for me to have written a paragraph, but I didn't fill that gap with text or thought or anything, so she went on. "I love the broad strokes of how you're painting me on your keyboard, Ricky, but you need to come out of hiding if you see what I'm getting at. You need to bare your soul and not just mine in what *we* do."

I pulled the fleece over my head in fake compliance with denuding orders; she rushed toward me with her hands up to keep me from completing the act of undressing, which I just might have done otherwise. Then that damned skateboarder was back heading the other way, his elbow struck a glancing blow knocking Danni off balance. I caught her. The kid stopped, flipped his skateboard up in the air and caught it. "Sorry Ma'am, you okay?" he asked, but seeing us embracing, he abandoned his concern and was on his way.

We were laughing hilariously then.

"Okay, okay," she said. "I just meant that you need to tell me about your life before and after 'the fence' thing. I'm intimately involved with someone about whom I know only that he stood by me at a fence for a very few minutes a long time ago and with whom I've more recently shared a few marvelous

days and nights. Don't you think I need to know more about him if I'm not to feel like poontang?"

"Danni, Danni, Danni!" I said, clutching her to me.

The skateboarder was back, slowly this time and then grabbed his board and approached us walking. "Are you two okay?"

"Don't we look okay?" Danni asked him, laughing good naturedly.

"I was afraid I'd hurt you."

"Oh no," she said, "You played your supporting role excellently."

I couldn't resist asking him, "How do you keep your pants up?" I had always wanted to know how kids do that nowadays. This was the only opportunity I'd ever had to ask, and I didn't blow it.

He grabbed the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up like I had my fleece the last time he flew by.

"Oh," was my chuckling response.

"But how do you keep *your* pants up, Mister, with her hangin' on ya like that?" and he was off in a cloud of his own laughter.

"How do ya, Mister?" Danni asked.

"It ain't easy; that's why I don't, I haven't, and I won't" I said before I appended, "but evidently all you want is the rags to riches story of Richard O'Hare before I do that? Is that what you want?"

"Yes, I do want that, and what I mean is, 'I do' in every related context."

"Good. Wasn't that enough of a walk. We better get inside before that damned skateboarder comes by again, so we'll be safe to get naked."

As we walked by McKinneys' fence, the mastiff was sniffing through a crack between the vertical boards and Jenni couldn't resist snarling right into the crack with the mastiff just giving a little whimper. Back at the castle I opened the garbage can and added another green bag. Once in the kitchen Danni gave Jenni a doggie treat. I had forgotten there were any left of those that Dad had insisted I buy. I watched and wondered, "Treat for what?"

Danni ignored my question and just said, "I think I'll wash the sheets and look around for what's for supper while you figure out whether and how much you're going to tell me about yourself."

"Baring the soul of one Richard O'Hare will be nothing like what's on the frontispiece of 'The Day Jack Died' or any other of his novels. That was just

fluff – all they needed to know and some that I didn't write,” I explained to Danni. “But this... this will be Ricky's real story. Are you ready for that?”

“Just get started keyboarding,” Mr. O'Hare. “It may take a long time.”

I grabbed my laptop from the yellow-topped table and headed off into the darkness of my bedroom office.

Danni's easy banter reminded me of how different life had felt growing up in a house where laughter was rare, and life moved by an autopilot invented by David O'Hare.

“My parents had met at the university. David was in engineering and Elizabeth in English literature. They were assigned to each other at a planned get together by the elected social chairman on his floor at the dorm and whoever arranged it at her sorority. It was painfully awkward, but their shared shyness and awkwardness cemented the deal. They were destined from that point forward to the restrained life of mediocrity of those afraid of demanding more, or at least that was how I believed it to have been and to have continued for nearly sixty years.

“In the months waiting for my father to die, I was told intimate details of the Dyna Soar project, Minuteman with the implementation of the launch control protocols and mechanisms that kept America safe throughout his career and the ‘cold war’ with no sense of the devastating effects of domestic terrorism that is tearing our society apart since. About Mom, with whom he lived those sixty years, he knew nothing other than that she did ‘housework’ of which details he knew nothing other than ‘making supper’ and ‘doing’ the dishes on a regular basis; if I had pressed him, he would probably have added ‘vacuuming’. He didn't know what she read or that she had written anything at all. He had no idea who it was that she played cards with, how often, or if it was canasta, poker, or bridge. Nothing. But the lunar flyby of Pioneer 4 in 1959, Ranger 7's deliberate impact on the moon in 1964, and the soft landing of Surveyor 1 in 1966, and the successful orbit insertion of Lunar Orbiter of 1966, he knew in minute detail. I heard those minute details about them all, some of them multiple times in my months here waiting for him to die and forgot them as soon as his head had laid back with his mouth ajar asleep. He had been asleep before ‘one small step for man’ and when he awoke, he

started up again at the beginning until finally he didn't wake up and the beginning and all the rest was over.

"I made the arrangements to lay him next to mom, and paid to have the stone read, 'His name is engraved on a plaque on the moon.' I didn't pay to add 'along with 400,000 others.' Beside his stone, mom's read, 'Loved by all who knew her'. I think the clause excluded my dad; me too, maybe. I had a role in her epitaph too, but only because her friend Judy had suggested it.

"Every generation has a longer backstory like Danni's, but hers was somehow relevant to who she had become. Mine wasn't. That David O'Hare had an ancestor who rode horseback as protection for the wagon train that made it to Molalla, Oregon has no relevance whatsoever with regard to David or me these generations later. It has nothing to do with who we became. And that Elizabeth could proudly trace back to one of the Mercer Girls in Seattle did not make Lisa O'Hare who she was or any more exciting.

"I found a diary mom had kept hidden away, but 'hidden away' is rather superfluous in a house where dad lived. If dad had opened it and it didn't have numbers or acronyms in it, he would have slammed it shut and maybe thrown it away. It was there in a drawer. There wasn't sixty years' worth of information in it, but there were some gems that have to be used in a novel sometime. I found a book of poems in a kitchen drawer. She had highlighted these lines in *Rispetto* by Sara Teasdale: 'I grow so tired I almost cease to care, And yet I would that he might come once more.' The literary magazines indicated that it was she who had subscribed. I had to cancel 'Smithsonian' after I came. Dad must have been throwing them out because there was only the most recent and mom had died twelve years before. [Elain came to mind.] The lone remaining 'Thoroughbred Record' issue was from 1976. She must have subscribed when I was grooming at Longacres, curious about what the alure could have been. She must have cancelled it herself after that one year. Dad wouldn't have been curious; he'd have thought he knew. She must have been receiving it in 1975 while I was living there, but I never saw it. I guess dad and I had something in common."

In thinking about what I'd written, it was clear that Dad had lived in a world of numbers, acronyms, and technical achievements. Mom had found

solace in quiet corners of poetry. I never understood either of them, and upon reflection, I doubt whether they really knew each other. With Danni now, I desperately want to understand her. She intrigues me like they must never have been intrigued by each other.

Danni had left me unsupervised as long as she could stand. She was back.

“So what have you written for me,” she asked pushing me out of my seat.

I exited the room, which seemed appropriate under the circumstances, to make another pot of coffee. Danni had already picked up my coffee habit, but not my role in making it. When I had it brewing, I sat at the breakfast nook, taking up the August 1976 Thoroughbred Record that Danni had left lying there. Seeing the name Bold Forbes brought back memories of him almost running away with the triple crown except for having been caught at the wire to finish third in the Preakness. Stupid, stupid, stupid trying to wire classic races without laying off the pace; I was starting to think like a race tracker. He had been eclipsed for horse of the year that year by the famous gelding Forego. I recalled then that in Washington the role of a famous gelding had been played by Turbulator who had not begun racing until his 4-year-old year at the Playfair racetrack in Spokane, he had won prestigious northwest stakes including... I couldn't remember.

Danni came in from the bedroom with a quizzical look.

“Do you remember who won the Longacres Mile in 1974?” I queried.

“Of course. Times Rush.” After a pause she said, “not that impressively, just a tick faster than the consolation that was won by the 3-year-old Prince Caligula.”

“Had Turbulator run in that Mile?”

“No. He ran in the consolation, but out of the money.”

I was shocked at her memory. “You remember all those details after all these years?”

“Yeah. I was a race tracker just like your dad was an engineer—the devil is in the details.”

“My God!” was all I could say.

“I liked your start by the way, but you haven't even been born yet, and you're already burying your parents.”

“It's a tough job,” I said, “but someone had to do it.”

“I know, I’ve done it.” Pausing as if for 30 seconds of silence in respect, she added, “I’ve met David and Lisa now, and a little bit about the Donner party, but nothing about little Richard.”

“It wasn’t the fucking Donner Party for Christ’s sake! That wagon train went South to California... they got off the Oregon Trail some years before there was a David or a Richard. But if you insist, the anticlimax of Richard O’Hare is about to happen.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’m going to get some groceries while you find little Ricky.” She was gone.

“There is evidence that David and Lisa had sex on at least one occasion, and I think that may have been the exception that defied more general rules. There is the line, ‘And yet I would that he might come once more.’ But one way or another I was born and would never experience sibling rivalry. There are few and scant records of my arrival, however, I did find a copy of my birth certificate in one of Mom’s drawers, with dates in agreement with when I blew out candles each year and proof that I had not been adopted.

“My first memory is vague; there were tiny little candles, I think. Then a shadowy image of a girl my age, neighbor girl, I think, and a cat, hers, I think. I don’t think we ever had a cat or dog... or any pet. Numbers. Dad insisted on numbers, multiplication tables, square roots. Who learns how to do square roots before learning to tie one’s shoes or going to kindergarten?

School was where no one taught me any math I didn’t already know. I was always big, so no one bullied me. If they teased me, I hit them. No one taught me that. I had to unlearn that. Mom worked on teaching me that after she and I sat across from the principle to my mother’s humiliation. I could tell she was humiliated. We talked about it. Dad shouldn’t know. She wouldn’t tell him but don’t hit anyone unless they hit you first. That’s what she said and that’s how I behaved thereafter. Teacher’s pet without being bullied. Maybe it’s a unique concept, I don’t know. Nobody bullied me and I didn’t bully anyone else.”

I got up and went into the kitchen to pour another cup of coffee. I was thinking about Danni’s interest in Riley and how that all fit into my story:

“I was in the third grade when I became aware of him, or more correctly when he became aware of me. He wasn’t as big as I was, but it was already apparent that he was an athlete; his insistence and assignments made an athlete out of me. I was his sidekick. He would pitch the ball into my mitt; I would lob balls for him to hit. I knew he mentored me to accentuate his own skills, but I knew that the association was to my benefit. If he was on a team, he insisted I be on that team. He threw the football, and I could get to where it went and catch it.

“Math whiz and athlete; now there’s a combination. Dad kept me ahead in math and science; Riley coached me to be a valued team member. I was a jock. In basketball I was the tall kid on the team and played center for a while until Cramer outgrew me, but he was awkward. We placed him under the basket; I was strong forward. Riley thought I should just rebound the ball for him to shoot his jump shots, but I rebounded his jump shots to lay them back in. I usually outscored him on fewer shots.

“And that was the situation that got me to the track – probably because Riley didn’t want me hanging with anyone else while he was busy at the track. Riley worked for his dad and his dad knew that friends of Riley might not be good help. His son, maybe, but that was it and I was not to hang around their shed row. I sat around on the guinea stand reading Dick Francis, or watching workouts, or in the kitchen eating waffles till the trainer Jack Winlock asked if I needed a job. I worked for him till the event at the gate. I didn’t like him, but I got paid.”

I hadn’t drunk much of that cup of coffee—maybe half, but it was cold. I rose from my chair and strolled back to the kitchen for more. “Danni’s been gone awhile,” I think. Jenni seems to be thinking the same thing but maybe about supper, so I got food out of the fridge for her. I realize that I’ve written the easy part of my bio with the hard parts still ahead. Danni knows a lot about me already; she keeps mentioning Malibu. I’d rather neither she nor anyone else knew all there is to know about me, but ‘it’s what it is’, isn’t that what they say? I refuse to write about or dispute anything that has ended up in the news media; that’s their bailiwick, not mine.

Hot coffee in hand I trudge back to the dark room to finish the exposure.

“After I walked out of Longacres, I moped around home for a week or so before heading south to Berkeley to become a mathematician; I was doing alright. There were a few guys who were better at math than I was, and I never tried to figure out why, but there were girls who thought I should have a larger role than tutoring math, so I took on that extended role and dropped out. Cramer and I had become friends my senior year. He was saner than Riley and had some intellectual interests I respected and shared; he was into physics and philosophy, relegating mathematics to the role of a language for doing physics which seemed like a good perspective to me. Philosophically he was a logical positivist—if you can’t hear it, see it, or touch it, it isn’t there. I had actually argued with my dad about that; he was an instrumentalist pure and simple.

Riley had gone off with his dad to California, so when I came home at Christmas time and he and his dad hadn’t, I hung with Cramer. We talked about our college experiences and ultimately, I transferred to WSU that I will always refer to as ‘Wazzu’. I had started to outgrow its image as cow college, so that’s where I got my degree as a philosopher.

“So what do you do with a degree in philosophy? Well, for one thing, you look at the world differently, but it doesn’t look back at you any differently. You just flip hamburgers with a little more philosophical perspective until you get smart and learn how to program computers with the bit of mathematics that you remember. You hire into a corporation whose CEO has learned that the computers he’s bought could further enhance his wealth, and you are then assigned a nominal dollar value that, although less than you assess proper, you like it a lot better than the minimum wage you were getting otherwise.

“But you’re still a philosopher at heart or somewhere in the back of your mind, however undervalued you feel, so you write down ideas as you have them and it becomes a dialogue between you and the nebulous ether to which you eventually assign names and roles to state for you what you are unable to get anyone to listen to directly, and a pretty girl who likes something else that you do tells one of her friends about this crazy habit you have and she knows someone else who needs a columnist for a zine and then some muckamuck somewhere in that same ether says they’ll publish a book if you write it. So

you write it and then they want another one and you get winging it more and more and... fuck philosophy.”

I had to pee. That coffee is going through me like there aren't any buffers in there. I switch on the light in the leu and it's bright. I've been in complete darkness other than my big screen, so I blink a little and notice how clean and sparkly this tiny room is. I pull the shower curtain back and sure enough, it sparkles in there too. And I think again of Danni and what she's done to this place. I flush the toilet, turn out the light, and leave... but... I turn the light back on just to lower the toilet seat. Dang! As I enter the kitchen Jenni looks at me as much as to say, “Okay, asshole. It's just you and me. Danni ain't here to do it.” So I get the bag and leash, and we do it. We are both of one mind that Danni would have done it better... and where the hell is she? So, more coffee and back to the bad job at hand.

“Along this path are many potholes full of quicksand for the soul and you trip and stumble headlong into every single one, usually with a woman in your arms who didn't think it was a pothole at all and that she isn't quicksand until you tell her so and she files for divorce in one case and before it's gone that far in others as with Elain. They had been the nicest of the lot by far, their only problems were that you were an insensitive asshole. You figure that out long after they had been replaced by many other women and a dog with a woman's name. But you keep your publisher happy, meeting every deadline he set by out prioritizing everything with any meaning in your life until you're done and have received the checks and praise, keeping track of the years by the names of the women you so totally deserved. And here you are, having lost track of the years; it's been the year of The Dog now for how many years?

“And your mom dies when you're stuck on a deadline and since no one ever taught you that Moms override deadlines, you skip the funeral keeping your fucked up priorities straight and go off on a guilt trip to Thailand fueled by booze that you don't even like. But years later your Dad calls to say he's dying, and you decide you're not going down that spiral again. So you out prioritize your top fucked up priorities and find out that nobody gave a damn about the scheduled deadlines anyway. So you go watch your dad die, who had been too busy to watch a single one of your games growing up, leaving

your mom up there in the stands under an umbrella in the rain all by her God damned self. You are now back where he'd been stuck his whole damned life, where you started this fateful journey too God damned many years ago.

“And then one day I get this Facebook message from Danni O’Neill and if I’m not terribly mistaken things just might be taking a turn for the better if I don’t screw the pooch again.”

But where is Danni now? Me and my pooch are wondering.

She has been away too long to just be shopping for groceries. I think she maybe went home to feed the goldfish or throw some hay to the horse or something. I was definitely worried that I might not see her again for another fifty years, that she had figured out that Richard O’Hare is indeed the asshole I had been trying to tell her he was, and he’ll be screwed out of that one good thing to happen to him in longer than he can remember.

But right at the bottom of desperation I heard Jennifer scramble off the bed and into the kitchen. She gave a little bark at the door, so either Danni’s back or one of my exes is here with an AR-47 and this is where the story ends.

“Hi,” she said. “I brought some pizza. I hope you like peperoni.”

“I like you being back,” I said. “That bag is all the groceries you got in what...” I looked at my watch, “two and a half, three hours?”

“I went home,” she answered quietly without meeting my eyes.

“Why?”

She opened the pizza box slowly. “I don’t know, maybe to get some clothes.” She shifted her weight, the change in her outfit catching my eye. But there was something she wasn’t saying.

Knowing too well how this sort of thing goes, I interjected: “You think we should put this on hold?”

She froze. Then, in an almost desperate tone: “No.” She stepped forward, pulling me into a tight hug. “I just had to see if I could go back to where I’ve been. To see if I could handle it without you. I can’t, Ricky. Please, don’t make me leave.”

Jennifer was standing with her front paws, one on each of us. So Danni let go of me and picked Jennifer up and hugged her. “It’s okay Jenni, you’re both our dog now.”

We sat down and ate pizza with all three of us in a good frame of mind. When we were done Danni asked whether I had had any luck in finding Ricky. I had to admit that I didn’t consider my effort lucky or successful, but I had tried. I hadn’t liked where I had found him hiding.

“Can I read it?” she asked eagerly but with empathy.

“Yeah, sure. But can we please be done with Richard O’Hare then; he would like to be transmigrated.”

“We’ll get that done then. Okay?” and she went off into the bedroom.

Before long she was back. I’m still sitting on the couch with Jenni beside me, her head in my lap with me stroking it having nothing better to do. Danni sat down on the other side of Jennifer laying her long slim fingers on Jenni’s back. She was eerily quiet for some time. I looked over at her finally, noting that she was deep in some morose thought or other.

Eventually I could take it no longer. “What...?” I interrogated.

“I think I saw the ghost of Jack Burden,” was how she answered.

“That cynical bastard?” I responded trying to sound cheery.

“Yes, that cynical bastard. And I can’t figure out whether I’m supposed to say, ‘Poor Jackie-Bird’ in my role as Anne Stanton and whether we’re trying to find Judge Irwin or Willie Stark and what the hell will we do when we find them. Or am I supposed to be that poor yellow mulatto Phebe in the sad story within a story, being sold down river with nothing she can do about it. Ricky, you can write the most dismal passages I’ve ever...” Her voice drifted off.

“No, no, no, Richard O’Hare ain’t no Robert Penn Warren; he’s just an imitator.”

“Ricky,” she spoke now with sadness and caring. “We need to get you out of here.”

“That bad huh?”

“Ricky, listen to my little story within a story, okay? Anne Stanton and Jack Burden ended up together, in Warren’s ‘All the King’s Men’. But there was no joy because they brought their baggage with them. They should have spent their lives together; baggage and aspirations, that are the same thing,

kept them apart. It could keep us apart after we've finally found each other. Right? We don't need to do that, you're writing this story about us with my help; we're not acting out someone else's tragedy, okay? This story is by-god going to have a happy ending or I'm out of here right now."

She paused, looking at me intently.

"I'll be leaving here tomorrow, Ricky. I hope to bloody hell that you'll come with me. I'll show you my old Kentucky home; it ain't Louisville. It ain't even Keeneland, but it sure as hell ain't Malibu. It's home, and I'm gonna be there till I die!"

Chapter Five: My Old Kentucky Home Again

Same day flights are hard to book but Danni did it. A layover in Dallas on the way to Cincinnati makes no sense but it seems to be how they do things anymore. SeaTac was awful what with having to get Jenni crated up for the trip. The taxi driver took us to departures and even though not many flights depart at that hour, traffic was jammed up. He told us that the traffic is worse for people waiting to be picked up at arrivals at night; the arrival terminals are so jammed that smart travelers are getting picked up at departures during the evening hours. Thus, both arrival and departure traffic is always jammed up at SeaTac. It's crazy. I'm glad I'm no longer a 'frequent flyer'.

That first leg of the flight was uneventful enough; it was still light enough out to see the curve of the horizon from thirty-thousand feet—flat-earthers must never have taken a cross-country flight. But I hate the linear layout of the Dallas airport with the crowds rushing for commuter trains between airline terminals although it was late enough that by then it wasn't a problem. Danni worried about Jenni's crate making our connection for this final leg of our journey. I just worried about us making it, but the layover was several hours.

At the airport in Cincinnati we rescued a distraught Jenni from her crate in baggage before renting the SUV and heading south toward Lexington. I felt rather ambivalent about the drive into the unknown, but Danni was alive with anticipation. It was a bright sunny morning, but although I had committed to this new life with Danni, I had no sense of any certainty with regard to what that commitment involved other than initially heading south on highway 75 to Lexington. Danni kept looking over at me like I'm supposed to be excited, pointing off in some directions, naming off stud farms, and telling me the direction to this and that from my position behind the wheel, all of which I was evidently supposed to have been familiar with but wasn't. I'd never been here before. I glanced furtively left and right as she informed me that it had been especially dry this year so that field that wasn't irrigated turned brown. I was tired; we had flown all night.

As we skirted around east of Lexington having turned off on highway 64 toward Meadowbrook the sun was high and getting higher; it was hot on my side of the car. We turned onto 89, heading south toward Irvine through lush pastures in around Ruckerhill Jacks, through Trap with Fox's general store, hilly farm country lush with deciduous trees—oaks and beeches, and I guess from what Danni told me, also short-leaf pine, and green meadows with white fences. We drove over a long bridge, moving on toward Irvine, with Danni getting more and more antsy with each mile, leaning forward to find her way. Somewhere along the line 89 had turned into, or was the same as, Winchester Road. I didn't know which. A few miles past Trap we passed through an area she called 'The Forks', a joining of tributaries I supposed. And then it wasn't long before she slowed me down to a crawl, slowing the several cars behind us that honked when there was room to pass; an older woman on the passenger side of a passing pickup flipped me an angry finger with a bright red nail. Danni was busy looking off to the right for the sideroad that she finally found, New Fox Road heading west in through the trees.

We had gone maybe a mile down that road with no signs of civilization until finally in coming around another corner we broke out of the trees at a junction with the Old Fox Road. There was a fenced pasture just off on our left. It was overgrown with tall grasses and weeds, but rather picturesque, nonetheless. "That's it," she exclaimed. "I'm home. Ricky, you and I are home." A wooded sloping hill was on the right as Old Fox Road meandered on its way; buildings appeared, rundown to be sure, but evidently what had been someone's family farm in the past and would apparently be again, now and on into the future. Danni was home. And so, it would seem, were Jenni and me, the strays that Danni had brought home with her. Jenni hadn't ever been free to roam; neither had I; Jenni loved it; I wasn't so sure. Richard O'Hare had not just moved back into a Malibu apartment.

Mostly I just watched as Danni wriggled her way back into her natural environment. It reminded me of Lolita the killer whale being returned to the wild after fifty years in captivity. It's a writer's mind that so readily ties the woman he loves returning to the blue grass together with an orca freed into

deep blue sea. One does what one does because one is born that way or has taken a fancy to similes and metaphors somewhere along the way. So I was seeing this as a catch-and-release-after-fifty-years story that I was along to witness and document. But, of course, to document such a story properly one must adapt to the new habitat just to see what happens. It's like Danni's rule of having to be naked to paint a nude. Not a problem... maybe. But I'm not good in Kayaks and I've never yearned to be a farmer. Groom, maybe—once, not a farmer.

“C'mon.” Danni was excited and Jenni's tail was twitching her whole body right beside her. “I want to show you the house.”

“Which one?” I asked as I took my first small step onto the surface of Kentucky. Neil Armstrong didn't go there to farm or was that was my father talking.

I could tell that she was concerned about my reluctance to embrace such a wonderful situation. “Both houses, but one at a time stupid.”

So one at a time I was shown every dusty nook and cute cranny of every building on the farm. I've seen old houses before although these were a little different, I'd have to grant you that. But what I really wanted to know was, “How big is this God damned farm?”

“Just thirty-seven acres,” she said, as if it were a postage stamp.

“How many acres in that field over there?” I asked, pointing toward the fenced area nearest the house, trying to calibrate thirty-seven acres.

“Ten, eleven, I don't know.”

“Where's the rest?”

“Well, the buildings are spread across a couple acres I suppose and that field over there is two or three.”

It took me a minute to formulate my next question which was. “Which woods are part of this farm?”

“Those over there,” she said, pointing to the other side of the larger field. “The trails through there and out beyond the property and on out to the river are so beautiful that no one could help but love it, Ricky. Escarpment rock formations out there and beyond are amazing. I'm going to get us a couple of horses so we can ride out through there and down by the river.”

“What river?” I asked.

“The Kentucky river; it’s beautiful as it winds along so peacefully.”

“Am I really going to be a farmer?” I asked cynically at last.

“I don’t know,” she responded pertly, “But you’re sure as hell going to be married to one.”

“When will that happen?” It felt to both of us, I’m sure, as though I were in the final stages of Alzheimer’s, or a zombie taken over by David O’Hare. I imagined that that would weigh heavily on her at this point; it should, but apparently not.

“It’s already happened,” was her retort. “Your having come with me all this way to Kaintuck was tantamount to saying ‘Yes, I do, Ma’am’. We’ll get paperwork and rings for our fingers to prove it to even you whenever you’re ready or we can find a priest to convince you. It’s legal for you to marry a black woman in this State anymore.”

“Oh God!” I said and my ‘black’ woman was gracious enough to laugh.

“Whether you’ll ever be a farmer or not is up to you. I’ll bet you will.”

Everyone knows we’re going to die some day and yet they laugh it off, is what I thought without expressing it. My God I felt old. I love this woman and I’m anxious to learn and write her story, but I’m becoming increasingly aware that I’m not good in kayaks and I won’t be at farming either.

Back in one of the houses, the ‘new’ one that her mother had helped to build, Danni yanked a sheet off a piece of furniture with dust flying off with the sheet and on out through the back door on a sweet-smelling breeze that had wafted through from the front veranda, releasing the faintest scent of old tobacco and furniture polish. The furniture it exposed was a Naugahyde recliner that was the exact model as my dad’s favorite chair, where he had died, and where Danni had chosen to sit with Jenni when she first came to my place in Renton.

“Sit there,” she demanded. “We flew all night, and you refused to sleep. You’ll feel better tomorrow.” And she was off.

“Um...” As I was falling back into the chair, I raised a hand to stop her. “Just one more thing,” I said Columbo style, “how long have these buildings sat empty? It can’t have been fifty years.”

“Pretty close,” was her casual response.

“Well,” I was having a hard time formulating my question. “They do look a little rundown, but the thing is, well, they don’t seem to be as dilapidated as I would have imagined. I’d have thought they would be falling apart if they had not seen some repairs in what... going on fifty years.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ve come back every year or so on my vacations and I’ve worked my ass off like we’ll be doing for a while. I’ve also had Jameson on contract to check in on the place every now and then to do any emergency maintenance such as keeping the roofs clear, cleaning out the gutters, and making sure the pipes haven’t frozen in the winter.”

“So is this just one of your vacations?”

“No,” her hands were on her hips now as she glared at me impatiently. “It’s the rest of your fucking life. Go to sleep.”

I digested that slowly and while she was still in ear shot, I asked, “Will I be meeting this Jameson? Is that the name?”

“That is his name. We’ll get him to help us. Go to sleep!”

I sat and watched her flit around, floor boards creaking, until I had fallen to sleep. Jenni had joined me by then.

It was nearly dark when I woke up, somewhat refreshed I must say. I do think Danni had made a little extra noise banging pots together to wake Jenni and me. Jenni was off and running to the bowl of chow that had been laid out for her. As for me, a cheery Danni McGee, Danielle O’Neill (or O’Hare), depending on which daydream one chose to believe, was standing there facing me with two hands out to pull me from my seat as if I was an old man. “You want to clean up first?” she asked. “It’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

I really hadn’t noticed much until I got into the bathroom. It sparkled – isn’t that the term? Not one my dad would ever have used, but it seemed like the right word and that it ought to be used on occasion, so I used it as I walked into the kitchen and found that it applied there too. And then I turned and looked back at the room I had crossed to get here. Everything was ‘spick and span’, isn’t that the term?

“Wow!” I said, “You are absolutely amazing.” For which faint praise I got a kiss.

This, it turns out was the house her mom and dad and grandparents had built. I hadn't noticed when I had first entered the house, so after supper which was a kind of goulash pasta dish, I went out onto the veranda with its rail and steps on both sides and looked up at the old-fashioned grooved ship-lap boards on the ceiling. It was a kind of light azure, yellowish in places now, but blue. There will be no haints in this house. Stars pierced the darker blue of the sky. I laughed with joy, and Danni came out and looked up at the ceiling and the night sky and laughed with me as we leaned against the railing.

We slept well that night in a beautifully made four poster bed. There were oil paintings of horses hanging on the wall across from the bed that I hadn't noticed on my introductory tour. I noticed now that they were all signed by the same 'J. O.' I kept hearing so much, and yet so little, about. The frames were plain unfinished walnut that did not detract from the paintings.

"I like that one," I said pointing at the horse in a nontraditional pose.

"That's Rabbit Run," she said, "sire of Gold Run."

"Oh," I was learning some more of what I wish I had known a long time ago when I had been close enough to this woman to hug her but I hadn't. "He stood here?"

"Yes. So closely related to Reviewer, it was almost like a full brother."

"Reviewer?"

"Ruffian's sire."

"Ooh...yeah," I said, drawing it out unintentionally. "How long did he stand here?"

"Not very long. He had been badly injured on the track in a morning workout and the trainer gave him to Grandpa rather than putting him down immediately. That kind of thing happened to Grandpa. People liked him."

"What kind of injury?" I probed, wondering whether she had told me this before.

"Knee. It was totally busted. The vet said it looked like a hand grenade had gone off in there. He couldn't put any weight on it. Grandpa fixed up a hammock in the breeding shed so he wouldn't have to put weight on that leg.

"I'll bet you tried doing that sort of thing as a vet huh?"

"Yes. It doesn't work very well. Breeding Gold Afloat was a very tricky operation. Grandpa put Rabbit down afterward. But it took."

“Was Gold Afloat one of your grandfather’s mares?”

“She was. That’s her over there,” she pointed at another horse picture (a photo in this case) hanging on another wall. It was a win picture. “She was fast. That was her first start. Won it easily by seven lengths with her ears pricked at five and a half furlongs. Next morning she could hardly walk. The x-rays showed that both knees were shot.”

“So your grandpa bred a stallion who had broken his knee to a mare who had broken both knees.” I knew it was awkward, but I wanted to hear her explanation. “Was that a good idea?”

“Depends.”

“On what? Whether you want a horse with broken knees?”

“On whether you want sound horses that aren’t fast enough to even hurt themselves or champions that are. If you have a lightning-fast stallion who is like a full brother to a champion by Bold Ruler and a lightning-fast mare by an outstanding son of Native Dancer, you breed them. Honest race trackers want champions and take the terrible responsibility of trying to keep them sound.”

“Whoa.” Looking around the room and pointing at a third image, I asked, “Who’s that?”

“Manny O’Mar.”

“What did he do?”

“He was a she and she nursed Gold Run.”

“Oh,” was all I could say. I figured I knew the answer to the obvious question I would have asked but didn’t.

“Aren’t you sleepy,” she asked, and that was enough to put us to sleep almost immediately... well, I assume she had fallen to sleep too after her long night and hard day’s work.

I think we woke at the same instant early the next morning because Jenni barked the ‘blue streak’ that Danni had said she wanted to see. Danni beat me to the front door where a raccoon was just exiting the dog door, Jenni right behind and barking on down Old Fox Road. She came back wagging her tail happily when Danni stepped out to call her.

“I guess the racs have had free rein around the farm in my absence. We should maybe close that doggie door at night. Jenni has never had any potty problems at night; has she?”

“No, no, she hasn’t. She’ll be fine.” I had awakened with questions about Gold Run, but I figured this was my debut as a farmer’s spouse, and I should maybe show myself worthy.

“What’s the plan?” I asked Danni after we had dressed”

“There’s a pickup in that machine shed,” she said. “It should still run. I don’t know whether it still has fuel and oil. We maybe ought to check those things before we try to turn it over. Let me see, she led us to the kitchen, opened a drawer and pulled out a key chain with two keys. “Here,” she said. “One’s for the padlock, the other for the vehicle. See what you can find.”

So my first assignment on a farm went alright. I folded the tarp that had been on the pickup, figured out how to open the hood to check the oil. It was a little low but only slightly below ‘add’. The gauge didn’t work, but I could smell gas in the tank. I decided to try it. It took a few attempts, but it started. I figured I had better not turn it off till battery got some charge, so I backed it out and drove over to the front of the house and honked the horn a couple of times. Danni came running.

“Great!” she said, “Let’s take it into town when we’re ready. I’ll follow in the rental just to make sure. We maybe ought to leave it at Otto’s shop for a thorough going over.” And then out of the blue she said, “I’m starting to feel like a grown up.”

“Me too,” I said, “and I think I might just enjoy my life on this farm; it’s an experience I never had, and quite frankly, never missed growing up.”

“We’re good together,” she said.

“Yeah,” I seconded as we walked back into the house with our farm dog right with us. I had left the pickup running to let the battery charge. I hoped there would be enough gas. “What is plan number two?”

“I’ve been getting a list together of what we need. I have a few more things to check before I’m ready, so maybe you could walk the fences to see if there are breaks and figure out how much material it’ll take to fix the gaps.”

So I walked out through the grasses, wondering which if any of the blades were bluegrass, now brownish with summer. I looked around and smelled the

difference to city life I've become acclimated to. There's a major difference. A cardinal, the lighter reddish brown of the female, flitted by and further off I heard her mate with his 'here-birdy-birdy-bird' that trails off into the slower slurred tweet. A crow threw in a cah, cah, cah hopping from one fence post to another ahead of me. Looking further into my new surroundings, the woods were almost exclusively deciduous trees, but with a wide variety of leaf types: oak, beech, poplar, a kind of birch, and I even saw a dogwood. Here and there short-leaf pine punctuated the diversity. A brighter red cardinal flew through across the field and out into the woods, concerned enough about me to make a bunch of noise above the background hush. This was very different from the northwest conifer forests with the blue-black stella's jays and all of the other avian species that I did not see or hear.

There were no gaps in the seven or eight hundred feet of rail fence along the road, so I proceeded back along the far end heading away from the road. I scared up a deer resting in behind the fence, his white tail bobbing up and down as he vanished into the dense undergrowth beyond the fence. A few rails seemed loose along this stretch. There were a couple small trees and a few branches across the fence that had broken three or four rails.

On the opposite side adjacent to the woods that Danni had identified as part of the property, there was a tree that had broken a rail and a post that was wobbly; my yanking on it flushed up a noisy wing-beating covey of bobwhite quail that had been hiding there; I'd never seen that species of quail before. At the end near the farm buildings the fence was all intact.

When I got back with my accounting, Danni was ready with hers. So off we went down to the town of Irvine. Jenni preferred to riding with Danni in the rental. I drove ahead in case of trouble, but the truck ran fine. When I saw Otto's sign, I pulled in. Danni got out to meet Otto and introduced me as what she called her 'better half'. I don't know whether a better half is the top half or the bottom half of something. However, I think I was recognized by Otto as the bottom half since she did all the talking. She negotiated to have him check everything from engine to tires and to call her when it was ready to go.

"Have you seen Jameson lately," I overheard her ask Otto before we left.

“Yehe’s roun,” is what his response sounded like, but I hadn’t listened in on his earlier responses, so I don’t know whether that’s the way he speaks or just the way I heard it.

“What did you learn?” I asked when I got in on the passengers side and shooed Jenni into the back seat.

“We’ll give him a day or two.”

“Jameson?”

“He’s excellent as a farm hand and can get us a couple horses, cow if we want – chickens.”

“Is ‘he roun’?” I mimicked. “And does he fix fences?”

“Yes, and he does a good job too for a reasonable price. Grandpa used to use him.”

“Excellent!” I said, “At any price.” Then, “but is ‘he roun’?”

“Yes, he’s around. He’ll find out that I’m back and show up.”

I was confused, like, ‘sure, he’ll show up,’ maybe sometime next fall?

There was a diner in town. Danni drove into the parking lot in front of it, “Let’s have some breakfast.” So we did. She knew the waitress and the chef, of course. They were ecstatic to see her again. “What’re you gonna do wid da place? Keep it? Oh isn’t that grand, Maybelle would be so happy... Danl too.” These mentioned names I had already known but some I hadn’t. She had introduced me before as her other half but here as her husband. I liked hearing them both, but the last one better. Our order was multiplied by three, I swear, and I was hungry enough that I ate it all. I left a tip, a big one, to endear the husband to the crew, and we were on our way.

“Don’t tip so big,” Danni told me when we got back in the car.

We filled up the entire rear of the SUV with groceries. They were stacked on top of the pressure-treated eight-foot rails with a red sheet of paper stapled to the end of one. We also bought several of the pressure-treated eight-foot four by fours for which I had identified only one requirement, and nails. We had got all that at the lumber yard before we had gone for the groceries. We also went to the Tractor Store, not to buy a tractor mind you, but barn boots, jackets, gloves, jeans she suggested I buy, dog food, and dog treats. These details might seem mundane to others, but each new term opened a window into an unfamiliar world of farming for me.

On the road home I asked, “You’re okay telling folks I’m your husband?”

“Of course, it gives me added status around here. I can’t have them all thinking I’m a lesbian or a two-bit slut now can I.”

“Good,” I responded. “Mrs. and Mr. Danni O has a ring to it don’t you think? And just so you know, however you word it; it’s great. I think I’ll make it as a farmer’s spouse after all. You’ve greatly extended the range of my vocabulary today, but it may take me a while to get comfortable using the words in a sentence.”

“I may have to grant you an advanced degree then if you can get that post in there securely. Then ‘post hole digger’ and ‘tamping bar’ that you’ll find in the tool shed will become familiar as well,” she said. “Oh... and you better wear those leather gloves we bought, or you’ll wish you had. Those were a present for you.” She smiled that damnable smile of hers that fell now into the category of flirting without consequence.

“You bought two pair,” I said.

When we got home... Home! Now there’s another unfamiliar term that makes me smile. Anyway, yeah. We took the groceries into the house and then Danni dispensed with me, pointing out where I might find the tool shed. Having found it, I scrounged around and found a hammer. Eventually I found a shovel and what must be a post hole digger, adding finally a heavy bar with a flat end whose function I vaguely conceived as what Danni had called a “tamping bar”. Post holes don’t dig themselves—an observation I found amusing. Proud of my own initiative, I decided to drive the rental out into the tall grasses of the field to the offending post and drop a rail off everywhere one was needed on the way rather than carrying each item to its destination. I felt smug and a lot smarter than having come up with some clever metaphor.

I wrestled with the tree that had broken off and fallen across the fence much longer than should have been necessary. I was amazed at how out of shape I had become. For a few years I had run on a regular basis and lifted a few weights, but that was a while back now. With the tree finally out of the way, I knocked the rails loose and swayed the post back and forth till it had broken completely off beneath the ground. Then I started digging; I played around with how to use the bar to wedge what was left of the post out of there, noting how it had been encased in concrete and thus figured out why Danni

got that sack of cement that I had wondered about. So after I set the post in the hole, noting the marks where it had been treated to survive wet ground and weather, I emptied the sack of cement in around it. I tried to line the post up with its neighbors, filling in with dirt and tamping alternately till the post seemed completely solid.

As I was nailing the rails back onto the post, I saw Danni heading out through the grass carrying a chain saw with Jenni bounding up and then disappearing out of sight over and over as she leapt through the tall grass until they were there by me. So with the rails secured, she started up the saw and began limbing the tree. I threw some limbs over the fence till she stopped me, saying she wanted some of the larger limbs cut into sections for fire starters. Once that was done, she asked whether I wanted to buck up the log myself. “It’s kind of fun,” she said. She was right—it was. As I was cutting the log into sections, she was tossing them into the back of the rental. At some point she asked whether I thought maybe we should buy an SUV like this. “It’s pretty handy, don’t you think.”

“I do,” I said and added, “You said these gloves were a gift for me.”

She laughed. “I thought I’d just borrow a pair for a while.”

“When... well... if we ever return this SUV, we probably aren’t going to get our deposit back. Maybe we ought to just buy it.”

We drove along the fence then to each place where we needed to toss limbs and fix rails. Danni was a worker. I was having so much fun I forgot how tired I was. When we finally got back to the house after putting all the tools away and stacking the wood in the other part of the shed, the fun part was over and just the tired part was left.

“I’ve got an early supper cooking,” she said. “Why don’t you just sit there in that recliner.” So I did, Jenni, and I were getting used to the relationship.

Later that evening I met Jameson, a most amiable black friend of Danni’s. He seemed to have mastered everything except maybe iambic pentameter, but only because he hadn’t ever figured out a use for that. After a warm welcome and introduction by Danni, there was a lengthy back and forth about the old days with Danl, Maybelle, Henry, Milly, and Sadie. Then he and Danni talked over what had to be done to bring the old place up to snuff. I was peripheral

to the discussion more as a learning experience than contributor, but I was not snubbed or ignored by either of them.

Danni made riding horses a separate discussion. “One of them should be gentle,” she said; I knew to whom that horse was allocated. Thoroughbred rejects would be fine she told him as long as they were ‘relatively’ sound, which designation seemed to imply only that we wouldn’t have to put them down the day after they arrived, if Rabbit Run and Gold Afloat were examples of horses who had not been ‘relatively’ sound. But Danni and Jameson were on the same page, requiring few words to get there and I knew that whatever Jameson brought would be just what Danni would have wanted.

As I lay here in bed with Danni beside me and Jenni on the other side of her, I was aware of some aches from my earlier efforts, but somehow, I felt good about myself. I’ve been around a few blocks without learning much as I described in the accounting of my life, for which Danni had referred to me as “Poor Little Jackie Boy” in my self-assigned and poorly executed role as the ne-er-do-well womanizing Jack Burden who had narrated ‘All the King’s Men’. My life with Danni is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I think life here on the farm has been good for me. It’s as though Jenni and I have entered canine grad school where you learn that everything you can’t eat and can’t fuck isn’t necessarily a fire hydrant. There is more subtlety in the world than that; I’m enjoying the lessons about the devilry in the details of those subtleties.

Chapter Six: Restoring the Past

It took quite a while for Jameson, with a smattering of help from me and Danni, to get the damages on the buildings repaired and painted. Danni did most of the painting and had splatters in her hair and clothes regularly for a month or more. It was a lively, fun place to live where all the noise and clutter was relevant, and you could understand the reason for it even if you couldn't have done it on your own. It was totally unlike the usual chaos and cacophony of city sounds that lack apparent meaning. Some days I would get so busy with Jameson that I would forget altogether that it was Danni who had brought me into the mix and more like I belonged here. I didn't carry my iPhone or call my publisher back in the evenings, or even Roberta. Instead I'd just lay my head back, mouth ajar. I had now severed contact with all my previously known world.

Jameson had arranged for the purchase of a couple of horses. I insisted on writing the check for them. Mine was a nine-year-old thoroughbred gelding who had worked as a pony horse at Keeneland after retirement from racing. Danni's horse was a two-year-old thoroughbred filly too headstrong to train; she'd been at a training track for a few months before they gave up. Jameson had asked Danni a few days before they arrived if that was something she was up for. I had seen her eagerness in response and was anxious to watch how it played out.

"Wow! That's great. That's good breeding, Jameson," I had heard her tell him. "That's three-s by four-d to A. P. Indy. It doesn't get any better than that."

"Noh, duzn't. Milyun dollah yeerlin. Shame. Jiz you be careful, Danni," he said.

"What's 'three-s by four-d' and 'A.P.' mean," I asked her after Jameson had gone. "I think you told me a while back what that pedigree mumbo jumbo means; but just tell me again, would you?"

"It means the filly is inbred—third generation through her sire and fourth through her dam—to A.P. Indy, a highly fashionable and exceptional sire. He was inbred four-s by three-d to the prepotent sire Bold Ruler. We couldn't

afford a share in an LLC that owned this filly if there wasn't something seriously wrong with her and I'd rather it was her disposition than her legs."

Insufficiently impressed, I asked, "So, what's the A-period P-period for again?"

"Oh, that," she responded. "His Japanese owner named him after the Autopolis auto-racing track he had built; that's supposedly where the A. P. comes from, but the Indy part probably refers to the Indianapolis 500. Who cares; he's a horse – one hell of a horse; his dam is by Secretariat."

I vaguely recalled her having told me all that before, but I was far more focused on the fact that I had never ridden a horse before than on A. P. Indy's pedigree. I hadn't told Danni that, but I'm sure she knew and had taken care to line me up with the pony horse whose name as a racer had been Blue Berry Hill. I could have looked him up if I wanted to. Blue was a gelding who had been converted after a successful racing career to a pony horse role. And now to a casual riding horse. He adapted to his role as my steed as readily as I had to the joy of riding him. "He got some gumption but he ain't showin' it off all time," is what Jameson had said in promoting him to me. Jameson doesn't know how to lie; Blue's a good horse.

I wasn't awkward; I had actually been quite athletic in my youth, so with a little coaching from Danni, Blue and I became a good team with Jenni running along behind. Blue liked Jenni. I got to be a viable rider loping Blue in the pasture, but I didn't try riding in the woods yet.

Meanwhile, Danni had her hands full with Willow—short for Will of Steel. Her breeder had clearly understood her temperament when he filed for a name. Danni went off of her a time or two, but Danni could have ridden broncos at a rodeo, if she had wanted to. She was good enough that it was fun watching her without even worrying. I recalled having watched her ponying horses back when I had sat in the guinea stand on the backside at Longacres all those years ago. When she did go off, she was like a gymnast sticking it. Ultimately, she out-willed Will of Steel as I knew she would. After that we rode around the pasture together sometimes. Danni would force issues until she got Willow to do exactly what she wanted when she wanted it, so much so that I had come eventually to empathize with Willow.

I was still a farm hand, not a baron. If I saw fixes and improvements I thought should be made, I made them, and I think Danni liked that I didn't always ask for validation. I thought the other house on the farm should match the standards of ours. I had noticed that there had been some water damage from several leaks, so I arranged for Jameson to come by and we checked out the damage and got up on the roof to assess what needed to be done up there. We agreed that the entire roof needed to be replaced; he was agreeable to getting at it with or without me. There wasn't any rain predicted for a week or so, so we started on it. The job was back breaking, tearing off the old shakes, hauling them to the dump, carrying the bundles of shakes up the ladder, and tacking them down over the tar paper. Jameson was efficient; he didn't seem fast, but he got things done quickly. I decided his earlier comment about Blue Berry Hill definitely applied to him: "He got some gumption but he ain't showin' it off all time." It was his philosophy. Working with him was very satisfying in itself, and I learned a lot about Danni's family from him.

"I helped Danl when he put this here roof on," he said. "Enry an' Milly was workin on the tuther and Danl 'cided we'd get this un up to snuff too. Ruff uz jisa tot."

"Did you work with Danl right along?" I asked.

"Right wid 'im, 'e take me everwhere. I live here den, right out der in duh barn... shed at's over der now. 'E an Maybelle took me in, da Good Lawd luv 'em. Git us dat bundle now, wud ya, Ricky."

I'd lose track of time listening to him, sometimes slowing down on slamming nails or getting bundles till he'd nudge me to get up a little speed.

"Where do you live now Jameson?" I asked one day.

"Oh, on down by da rivah in a lil shack, me an' missus."

"Toward Irvine or the other way?"

"Tuther side a rivah ovah Joseph's bridge. End a Rio Vally."

"Do you have kids?"

"Yessah, cuppl. Gone now, Mabelle in Tennessee; Danl D, he done disappeah—doh no wheah. Gone. He mixed up some way."

"So how long did you live here on the farm?"

"Oh, I doh no—sixties, seventy, bout den. Danl died '78, I think. Good man, good man... Lawd God 'e was da bess man ever live. Maybelle too,

woman doh. Good, good woman. She die later... '79, 80 sumpun like 'at. She blackern black. She blackern me, missum bad. Missum still. You an' Danni is like um some way, yeh, some way." He was up on his knees then looking around. "Nuther bundl, Ricky."

That's how we worked on the roof, one bundle at a time.

"Did you know Henry very well?" I asked.

"No, not so well. But I knowed 'im; 'e was good man too. Temper doh, oh my. Not nobody mess wid Enry or 'e club 'em."

"Were he and Milly happy together, do you think?"

"Lawdy yes! Peas a pod. Peas a pod. An Ruff... oh yez. Three peas a pod."

"You remember how Henry passed?" I asked.

"Oh my oh my." He stopped then and started looking around but not for shakes, uncomfortably as if for nails or something, but I saw that he had nails. "Oh my oh my." I could tell he wasn't looking for anything at all, so I let that branch of questioning go.

On an unusually warm day, when Jameson and I were nearly done with the roofing, Danni came over with iced tea. The roof was burning hot to the touch, and we were both drenched in sweat, so we came down the ladder and sat in the grass under the big oak between the houses. While we drank the tea, savoring the tang, and commenting on the near record heat, Danni sat up and stretched her arms wide until her forefinger and thumb grabbed the brim of my hat. She pulled down over my eyes. I opened my eyes to watch her and adjust my hat. Jenni and Bugs were laid in the grass totally uninterested in human games.

"Let's saddle up and ride into the woods and on down to the river for a change," Lesa said as she rose and started running out toward the barn.

Jameson opened a sleepy eye and said, "Go, you go. Not much lef t'do up derr on de roof. I finish." He rose slowly to follow me as I strode on out to the barn.

The sound of a little grain in a bucket is always enough to bring the two horses running into the shed row. We saddled them up with Jameson right there watching us with his glass of iced tea, smiling. It was Danni who started singing that old Gene Autry song, "Back in the saddle again, Out where a

friend is a friend.” We all laughed and that was it until Jameson added, “Where da longhorned cattle feed,” and then we all joined in with, “On the lowly gypsum weed, I’m back in the saddle again.”

Danni and I put a foot in our respective stirrups and up we went and on out into the sweltering heat across the pasture till we reached the woods.

“You two have sum fun out der now.” Jameson yelled out to us. “I be gone when you come back.”

I had never ventured into the woods more than a few yards. It was brand new and marvelous for a city kid however old he had become. I was dodging branches and Blue was stepping over logs. It was fun for all of us, I think, the horses too. As Danni had promised the rock outcroppings of the escarpment in through the trees were beautiful; a cool breeze accompanied us on through the trees, Cardinals tweeting their noisy concern about our passage.

Danni found what had been the trail she had used as a child considerably overgrown. We followed it down along the river to a place where the horses could step into the cool water. Danni said this had been a ford. It was where, after the Hites had lost one of their best mares in foaling, they had sent Daniel to cross over to the Howards to secure a nurse mare. He crossed the river here many a time thereafter. Despite his family’s deep-seated prejudice, he had fallen in love with Danni’s grandmother, Maybelle. Danni said her mother had told her about that romance. She had forded the river with both her and Danni on horseback one time. Their horses had had to swim part of the way. The river is even a little deeper now since they put in another dam.

Both the horses drank and pawed at the water with their hooves muddying it in the process. A bullfrog took the occasion to hop out further into the water and disappeared into the weeds at the bottom. Danni told me the horses might try to roll in the water, so I should keep a good hold on Blue’s reins in case.

There were insects everywhere, especially right near the water’s edge. Large blue dragon flies hovered like miniature helicopters, dipping down occasionally to drink. Those shiny green-backed swallows skimmed over the water, then circled high up into the air—more than I had ever seen before. A king fisher flew from tree to tree with a swooping trajectory on each trip.

It seemed like every day for the rest of the summer and on into the fall, we rode for an hour or so. We’d walk or jog our horses along the many trails out

into those woods and on to where the Kentucky river flows so gently. I know it isn't the Suwanee river and I know a river isn't even included in the lyrics of My Old Kentucky Home that's sung with joyful melancholy every year at the Derby with julips in hand. But it's what comes to my mind when that song is sung. It's mixed by jangled neurons into Stephen Foster's Old Folks At Home song. But when it comes to the chorus, I regain my focus:

Weep no more my lady

Oh! weep no more today!

We will sing one song for your old Kentucky home,

For your Old Kentucky Home far away.

Danni's notion was that one must immerse all one's senses completely in the setting one attempts to represent in art, whether with brush or keyboard. I was being baptized into a lifestyle that was so totally different from what I had ever known. This was what her life had been growing up. I had realized by now that the story wasn't to be just about her. She had envisioned a grander scale—like climate rather than a single hot sunny day. Whether consciously or not, I thought, she saw herself as representative of some kind of racetrack ragamuffin syndrome. I was being readied for the task of expressing that in words. I was convinced that when she considered me sufficiently enmeshed in her situation to understand it, she would tell me to proceed.

I'd been on Howard farm for a few months, I didn't know exactly—many months, maybe. I had lost track of time—me, of all people. Go figure. It was late fall now; the days were short and getting shorter. We had Jameson come less regularly because we had things in pretty good shape. The holidays were coming on. Since I knew my role required a cue, and it was her role to give it, I had suspended the writing altogether.

The cue for my line in this production came one evening while relaxing after a pleasant but strenuous day.

“You haven't forgotten about the story, have you?” she asked. Her tone was light but expectant.

“No, of course not; I think about it every day and have wondered when you'd want me to start up again. I have always known it was when, and not if. So, is this when?”

“Would you hold me?” she asked as she walked over to plunk herself down on my lap.

It was wonderful—the kind of wonderful that only happens after the hard work that results in the situation you’ve wanted for a long time. Everyone knows you can’t buy happiness, but you can work for some desired end and when you reach it and you see that it is perfect, then you realize that you were happy all along and you’re still happy.

She looked into my eyes as if to share a secret, and said, “I cleaned off that desk in that extra bedroom you know; you should set it up however you would like for your office; you probably ought to buy a big screen to set up with your laptop like you had before. You can have your office anywhere else in the house or you can have the old house for a separate place of work if you want; it’s in pretty good shape now, isn’t it?”

“It is, yeah,” I said. “But I like being in the house with you; all I need is you and my laptop, not an office.”

“There’s a comfortable chair in that bedroom where I could sit to watch you keyboarding if that wouldn’t be too distracting, and you can sit there while I’m reviewing your stuff. If you’d prefer to just converse and write it up as you see fit later like we did before, that’s up to you. Now that the farm is back in order, I’m at your service whenever you’re ready for however long. With winter coming on there isn’t much we have to do on the farm. I’m anxious to learn more about what might have been between us all these years if things had been different. How do you see it, Ricky?”

“Are you okay?” I asked, she seemed unsettled.

“I’m good. I like sitting here thinking about what we’ve done and where we go from here.”

I couldn’t tell where she was coming from, where she was headed, or where she saw me in all this. But I went with it: “There’s a lot I don’t know about your mom, your dad, and the jockey and painter Johnny O, and what else you did for fifty years. We’ve just scratched that surface. But I sense that the story has a much bigger theme of an indefatigable yearning for champions, a Ruffian, a fated mating of Rabbit Run and Gold Afloat, all played over and over throughout the industry. There’s a fine line between lightning speed and soundness that race trackers strive to find. It is based, as I see it, on breeding

the fastest to the fastest and hoping for the ‘big horse’ that is sound enough to actually make it to a race. But the fastest are the most unsound because a half a ton lands alternately on each hoof that’s levered by a thin cannon bone with a tendon, cartilage, and little bones at each end. They run over forty miles an hour, so even when you get the big horse you dream of, he will probably break your heart. Trainers, vets, jockeys, and grooms care for these fragile legs on high strung animals whose massiveness and speed kills. That’s what I see.

“A hundred owners of a Limited Liability Corporation that own a horse are just investors at best, gamblers more likely, but without the perspective that gets it. So I’ve excluded owners because Mom and Pop owners of the past are gone; LLCs, sheikhs, and oligarchs have taken over completely and they’re not horsemen. The Breeders Cup requires appreciable nominations be paid for stallions if their offspring are to be eligible to run in the most lucrative races. It has forced the small breeders, who stand their own stallion to cover their few mares, out of the opportunity to even dream of breeding a Cinderella that might one day become a major champion. That’s the way I see it. I see Danni O as having lived the whole story, having heroically survived too many heartbreaks. Am I right?”

She sat there, tense in my arms for a long time. I had gone on too long. When she finally spoke, she said, “Willow needs to run.”

I don’t know what I had expected in response to my pithy commentary, but it wasn’t that.

“She’s good—really good,” she said excitement lighting her voice. “I can tell. She’s sound and would hold up. Her issue wasn’t injuries, it was her temperament. I can handle that. She’s Breeders’ Cup eligible.”

I didn’t know whether I was to confirm or deny anything so I just sat there waiting for what might come next, I guess.

“She’s your horse now, you know. Can I train her?”

“Oh my God!” I muttered, stunned. Danni was sixty-five and still figuring out what to do with her life. Her question was rhetorical. Stopping her would be impossible—like trying to halt a fast-moving train. I could tell Danni was serious, and when Danni gets an idea, she engages.

“Did you ever try starting that old tractor in the machine shed,” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Does it run?”

“I started it up once, so yeah, it runs. I backed it up and drove it forward a time or two. We haven’t used it for anything. Why?”

“Did you see a sled thing out there with a bunch of planks for smashing down grass?”

I was getting the picture. “You mean like that thingy they dragged around the track at Longacres to smooth it out after they ran the tiller over it? Yeah. There’s one of them out there.”

“I’m going to get Jameson to smooth me out a track in that pasture by the road.”

“I can do it,” I suggested.

“No. You’re a writer,” she said firmly, as though that settled the issue.

“I used to be a writer, before I somehow became a horse owner,” I said, amused by the absurdity of it all.

“Well, you’re being freed up to write again.”

Jameson was out the very next day, and the Howard farm had a track—more or less—for Danni and Willow to begin months of legging up with increasing speed as fall moved on into winter. The horse trailer, that had also been in the Machine shed, was taken out for loading and unloading Willow, first with Blue inside to calm her until he was no longer needed for that, but he rode in the trailer with Willow when we took the trailer out for a spin on the highway. Danni left no stone unturned, as thorough in whatever she did as the thoroughbred she would train. A matter of temperament. She had lined up to use a nearby training facility for starting to work Willow after a few weeks of legging up. They had a starting gate there that Willow gradually became used to, first just walking through on a lead rope and then with Danni riding her through, then with the gate closed and opened slowly, then the tail gate shut, and then finally working from there with the bell.

I wasn’t there every day, but often enough to be fascinated by the process. At sixty-five, Danni was as adept, and probably even better, with horses than she had ever been. I remember being impressed with how such a little thing could maneuver those thousand-pound animals with ease fifty years ago. It’s the same lovely little thing doing it still, but with less wasted motion.

Meanwhile I'm back behind my big computer screen; it's my 'fence'. Danni had become a girl again, the one I remembered and so want to capture with my keyboard. I'm still the same old man I've always been and trying to keep up with this energetic woman who, nearly my age, seems at least twenty years younger. Although relegated to secretarial chores, she continued to talk openly to me about her life that I enjoy vicariously. She would respond even as she scurried around from one task to another. Her mind was occupied on her business but there were words flowing directly from the activity and out of her memory with the spigot turned on. I tried to tread lightly with questions, but she would sometimes react as though they had been more intrusive than I had intended.

"Johnnie O used to ride for your mother, didn't he?"

"Yes. He was a good rider. He won several stakes at Keeneland before coming west."

"Why did he come west?"

She was busy throwing the saddle cloth on Willow and then the saddle and girth. "I don't know. Maybe it was because of Mom."

"He rode all her horses, back in '75 didn't he?"

"Yes. He rode some mounts for other trainers, but not many."

"Was there something between him and your mother?"

"No." She interrupted the question, but then added, "not then."

I held off following up on the information she had insinuated.

"Had there been a problem in Keeneland?"

"No. He wasn't getting enough rides."

"Why?"

She lifted her leg for a 'leg up' which I gave her, and she galloped off, doing laps on Willow. I guessed I shouldn't pursue that question either. Later I asked whether she had liked Johnny a lot back when he rode for her mother.

"Yes, of course. You and he were the nicest people I knew at the track."

Her words caught me off guard, stirring thoughts of the things Johnny and I now shared—more than just our Irish names starting with O.

She contributed a bit of humor to my awkward silence with, “I don’t know whether that means you were both really nice guys, or just that I ran with the wrong crowd.” She laughed at her own comment.

“Was he riding one of your mom’s horses when he went down?”

“Yes,” was all she offered, walking off to do something else then.

Getting information out of her about Johnny was like pulling teeth.

Sometime later I began again on a different topic.

“When did you leave the track for Wazzu?”

“Seventy-eight, I think. Maybe later.”

“It must have been seventy-nine,” I corrected. “I graduated in seventy-nine and I would have seen you if you had been anywhere near the Wazzu campus my senior year.”

“You mean no woman could escape your attention on the Wazzu campus while Richard O’Hare was there? Is that it? I sure wish I had been there.”

“Me too,” I said, “My attention would not have been diverted to so many wrong places if you had been there.”

I had checked before and found that she had enrolled as Danielle McGee in 1979, but in vet school a very few years later she had become Mrs. Danielle O’Neill.

“Did Johnny recover well-enough after that accident in ’75 to ride again.” I could have looked it up, but as Danni had told me, sometimes the medium is the message.

“Yes.”

The medium didn’t seem to make a difference in this case. It was just an unadulterated fact; the medium was silent with regard to expanded coverage.

“How long before he could ride?”

“A couple of years.”

I took a stab in the dark, “Did he stay at your mom’s?”

“Yes. For maybe a year after he got out of the hospital.”

I had convinced Danni to not give up on our rides back to the river, so on this occasion we were on horseback in the trees overlooking the muddy slow-flowing waters of the Kentucky river. She usually went ahead when the trails narrowed, but she had stopped and come back beside where I sat on Blue.

“I’m making this harder for you than it should be, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are.” I said it with a chuckle that was unreciprocated.

“It’s like you’re holding a microphone in my face,” she complained.

That produced a little self-reflection: was I digging for a story she wanted told, or did I just want to know aspects of her life that she had never shared with anyone else. I couldn’t decide either way.

But she had continued, “I liked Johnny, okay. I liked him a lot. Not like ‘that’ at that time, but I would have. I liked him because he was likeable and didn’t deserve all that had happened to him, but Mom did like him ‘like that’.”

“Was that only after the accident?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” And then, “That created some tension?”

“Tension? Duh. Enough that I came back here and lived with grandpa and gramma. I worked at that training track where I’ve been taking Willow. I exercised horses and ponied some others. I ran wild for a while without any real relationships, just wild. Most of those guys are gone now—maybe all of them. Dead, I think. It wasn’t a good time in my life.”

“Danni McGee having Gone amok, now that would be something to see.” I laughed and so did she.

Then I said, “That would have been what, ’76 and ’77, I suppose?”

The horses were walking back slowly toward the property.

“Yep. Then Mom showed up here one day, said she had sold Molly—got her claimed, the last horse owned by Howard Farm.”

“How come? She and Johnny break up?”

“Not exactly. Johnny got broke up; he went down again. Bad. Mom couldn’t take it anymore. When I asked about Molly, all she would say was that old race tracker adage, ‘five thousand dollars never bowed a tendon’.

“I said, ‘Ma that was coined a couple hundred years ago and five thousand was probably more like half a million. I bet you only got five thousand, didn’t you?’ I was angry because Molly was worth three times that much and a nice horse. Mom just said, ‘Yeah,’ her voice hollow, before walking away.”

I sensed that Danni was about to go off on a bit of a rant.

“Molly would win for sure at ten. Mom usually ran her for sixteen and she’d bring home a check every time. If she needed money, she’d run her at twelve-five in wraps so trainers would be afraid to claim her. She’d usually

win there. At ten there was no question. And there's eight and sixty-two-fifty before you drop to five for Christ's sake, but no, she packs her bags and puts her in for five. What in the bloody hell was she thinking. If you want to get a horse claimed, you drop them a notch in price, not five notches. That's just giving money away. Molly won her way back up: sixty-two-fifty, eight, ten—claimed at ten—then twelve-five, sixteen, and twenty and then she ran back and forth at twenty and twenty-five. Plater of the year! Yeah. Plater of the fucking year!”

Back at the stable, Danni dismounted, her hands moving to Willow's legs, seeming to make sure there was no heat, but of course there couldn't have been. We had just been walking. I think rubbing Willow had become a way for Danni to calm herself, I don't know, but that's what I think. I sat there on Blue, staring at Danni, my mind racing for something to say—anything—but I came up blank.

While we were still taking care of the horses after our ride through the woods, Jameson showed up to discuss something with Danni. Whatever it was it didn't seem to be any immediate concern of mine, so I went on into the house and started getting some food out of the refrigerator preparing for supper. Danni and I usually did that together.

After Jameson left, Danni joined me and suggested we just have some of that leftover shepherd's pie and relax. She told me Jameson had found out who she should talk to about getting our owners licenses her training license. Whoever he was, he was the son of one of Danni's best friends growing up who is dead now. She said she was going to call him the next morning. “Maybe we should head up to Keeneland tomorrow after I galop Willow to talk to him in person.”

“That track seems to have been central to everything in your life and I have yet to see it. I don't really want to see any racetrack for that matter, but I'm anxious to get out of here to see something a little different for a change. Maybe it's the dull chilly weather or just being stuck on my writing, but I seem to be in the doldrums. Maybe seeing some of the activities at that racetrack would free something up.”

“The track isn’t open now you know—just the office. They’re probably just cleaning up after the Horses of Racing Age Sale. But it’s a nice drive from here. I think you’d enjoy it.”

“Why didn’t you just wait for that sale if you wanted a racehorse?”

“I didn’t know I wanted one until I felt all that power under me; it made me feel young again, Ricky. We didn’t buy a racehorse; we bought a reject who just happened to turn into one, rising up like a phoenix from the ashes. And let me tell you, Will of Steel was a real steal, Ricky; you can put that in your book right now.”

The next day we were on the road – a pretty drive up 89. I hadn’t seen that stretch of highway since we arrived however many months ago.

“What’s the reason for this trip Danni? Just to see about licenses?”

“Yes. That and the issue with Willow.”

“Willow? You mean the documented fact that we stole her?” I laughed.

“No, we didn’t steal her. But it turns out Willow did a no-no when she was stabled up here. They might not welcome her back.”

“A no-no?”

“She killed someone.”

“What the bloody hell!” I was aghast. “She’s a rogue?”

“It happens, Ricky,” she pleaded Willow’s case lamely like an assigned lawyer would if you couldn’t afford your own.

“It happens? Are you kidding me?” I doubled down, “It happens? Like... Danni, I know shit happens, but it doesn’t usually kill people.”

“Viet Nam did,” she added, almost as an afterthought. “But Willow didn’t mean to.”

“Christ, Danni! Didn’t mean to?”

“You know her; she’s a nice horse.”

“Oh my God, not when you were breaking her. What did she do?”

“She kicked her groom in the chest with both hind hooves and he died. It Probably wasn’t even her fault.” And then, almost as an aside, “Didn’t you say you groomed On The Road that year you groomed at Longacres.”

“Yeah. My favorite horse, we were a team.”

“She almost killed Joey, the groom that replaced you—hospitalized him for a week or so.”

“No. Not On The Road. She didn’t have a mean bone in her body.”

“Joey did. On The Road broke a few of them.”

“Oh.” What else can one say? I was remembering On The Road, a very affectionate horse. She had extremely sore shins—that must have been the mean bone in her body; Jack would come by every morning after I unwrapped her and poke at her shins with his fingers making her flinch. “Keep putin’ that freeze on there kid,” he’d say and walk off.

We didn’t say anything else till the track was in sight.

“I think he told me he’d be in the kitchen,” she said. “His name’s Wesley by the way. I think he’d be interested that you are a writer. Might even help me get a stall. I betcha he’s read ‘The Day Jack Died’, Ricky, a lot of people have. How much you wanna bet?”

“I don’t bet. I left the track a long time ago and I never made friends with Perry Mutual when I was there.”

“Well, I’m going to introduce you,” she said, “to Wes, not Perry. Later I’ll tell him you’re writing my story. He’d like to be in it; I’ll bet you on that one too.” She was laughing. I didn’t know to what extent she was just laughing nervously out of excitement at getting back to the racetrack or at me and my different ways.

Wesley was alright. He knew Danni right off and remembered her family fondly. “How come you snubbed us when we sent that application for track vet, Danni? That was a good job.”

“No, Wes. Any job where you have to decide whether to pull the morning line favorite ten minutes before post time or regret not having done it when you should have, is not a good job. It was nice to have been asked, but no thanks.”

With regard to Richard O’Hare, however, I don’t think he gave a shit—I should have bet her. He clued Danni in on the what’s-his-names who were in charge of the whatevers at the track now, and how Danni could persuade the right people. He gave her dates of when everything had to be filed, etc..

He was particularly interested in how she had managed to calm Will Of Steel. “Now that filly could put on a show; let me tell you that. I saw her

throw a rider once and he didn't just fall off, let me tell you, she threw him, and she threw him a long way. He did not land on his feet, and he didn't get up without help.

She had Johnsons scared shitless of her. They won't want her back on the same track or in the same State as them, but if you show the racing secretary and stewards what you've told me you've been able to accomplish with her, try. Why not. We'll have to arrange that you're not near the Johnsons.

If you've got her in hand, I think that's all you need to prove. Show her to me when you first get here—before you unload her. Let me watch her back out of the trailer and see how you handle here. If she's well-behaved, I'll support you. It'll be good to have you back at the track; your family is part of the history of this place. It's been an awfully long time.”

And that was it other than the handshaking.

Leaving the complex, I said, “Well, you wheedled Wesley.”

“We did, didn't we.” she said laughing.

“Sounds like you turned down a good job. When was that?”

“Oh, about five years back I suppose – during the pandemic. I think Dr. Roberts might have died of Covid. It wasn't actually an offer it was just an invite to submit an application.”

“Sounded to me like you were a lock,” I said.

“Probably. You heard what I told him. Plus, things were going well for me at the university at the time.”

“Yeah. I get it,” I said, whether I did or not. We were both silent in our thoughts then for a while, just riding along enjoying the sights when I said, “You've never told me how your dad died.”

“Viet Nam,” she said.

Oh God. This story of Danni McGee is kind of getting to me... In my novels I just made shit up, made sure it was consistent without any extremely unlikely coincidences—probabilities were the key. Real life on the other hand can be very uncomfortably inconsistent and god damned hard to believe... and even harder once you realize that you have to believe it.

“God damn it, Danni!” I said finally. “God damn it.”

“That second one is my line,” she said, and we drove on in silence.

When we finally got home and I turned off the engine, Danni didn't move. She just sat there staring in front of her for a minute or so and then she said, "Ricky, I don't know where all you've spent your life, but from my experience all the very best things break down and die; it's fucking awful; and you can't do a god damned thing about it afterward. So you get over it because you have to." Then we got out and went into the house.

So, all I've gotten are isolated shocking facts, and I'm supposed to turn them into a story. How in the hell does one do that? By asking god-awful questions about what preceded and succeeded the god-awful facts is the only way I know how to do that, and that isn't any fun, but I do it. And so one day I asked Danni about when her father had enlisted for Viet Nam.

"He didn't enlist for God's sake," she reacted. "No one enlists to go to bloody hell. He got drafted in the first round of that fucking lottery, right before Christmas in 1969. I must have been ten. So have yourself a merry fucking Christmas Danni!" She paused to calm herself down I guess, "He did boot camp first and we saw him shortly before they sent him over there as a target. He was dead by summer."

We both sat there thinking about that from our separate perspectives before I proceeded with, "Did your mom continue training the string of horses that year?"

Danni just looked at me appalled before proceeding with, "She lost several horses from owners not thinking a woman could get the job done. I'll tell you that much. Owners are awful. A couple owners stayed; she had a couple claimers of our own that grandpa and grandma had raised; they won some races. Right after being notified that dad had been killed, Mom and I came home. She had grandpa train the horses and travel the circuit all that summer. He was good at it – might have picked up a few more horses. I went along with him for a few weeks at a stretch. I helped some; we were great together. The fall meet at Keeneland is when Mom finally had it together enough to take over again."

That night lying in bed with Danni sleeping on my arm, I couldn't sleep. I was in the middle of a dilemma: I want to know everything there is to know about Danni because I promised to write her story, but to do that I seem to

have to bring up these painful memories that are traumatic for her. I just wish I'd spent my life with her, picking stalls, soothing some of her aches, and precluding others from even happening, like Johnny O. Was he—or I for that matter—just another heartache or a part of the cure. Those thoughts weigh heavily on my mind.

Since that trip to Keeneland, I've been very careful when I pick Willow's stall in the afternoons. What someone tells you about someone else changes what you previously thought you knew about them. Some things you'd rather not have known. I suppose that is my life now. One is probably better off not knowing some things... but Danni wanted her story told... wonder if she still does... probably ought to ask her. But even that would be difficult. The more I thought about it, it seemed that me writing her story was my only reason for being here. It had initially seemed to be the only reason she had contacted me. But reasons change. I was starting to feel like I belonged here, like I didn't need that reason for being here. She tells people that I'm her husband or the other half of her, and that's what I feel like, like I'm half of something that I want to be a part of.

One shouldn't have to document the other half of your own life. Spouses don't have to testify about each other in court, do they? When I looked it up, I had found that, 'Spousal testimonial privilege aims to protect the harmony of marriage and to prevent the stress and conflict that might arise from being compelled to testify against a spouse.' Interesting concept in general I guess, but 'advisability' of the one spouse (me) testifying (which it feels like my accepted responsibility to Danni) for the other (Danni) falls more in a domain of marriage counselling than jurisprudence it seems to me. I's say it's a matter of prudence in either case. We're not married no matter what Danni may have implied to Otto, the waitresses, Jameson, or Wesley. There's no paperwork to validate any of that. Shouldn't there be? There won't be any offspring of this union, of course. There are no stepchildren other than Jenni; she would probably opt to go with Danni in any case. Inheritance wouldn't matter a hell of a lot to either of us. I would take Blue, but I don't know where I'd keep him—not Malibu.

I guess I fell to sleep.

Chapter Seven: A New Beginning

The holidays came and went without significant change on Howard farm. Danni worked with Willow every day and every day or so we rode out to the river together and talked. But I can't seem to write two paragraphs that hang together anymore. I've had writer's block before; it's not a usual phenomenon for me, but I've had it. But now I'm not sure if I've been duped into writing what can't be written or if I'm just stuck. Where does one go from here? Life is good; the telling of it, not so much. That's essentially what I tried telling Danni one morning at breakfast. I struggled, wanting her to understand, but it didn't seem like she even wanted to understand.

"Do you really think I contacted you after all these years just to get you to write a biography or novel about me as a racetrack ragamuffin? Do you really think I'm so vain, or that I thought you needed help finding something to write about? Remember when I told you I bet on Gold Run, and you stupidly took that at face value?" She paused a second—only a second. "I thought you had finally figured that out. Grow up for Christ's sake," she bellowed. "I have to go get Willow worked," and she bolted for the door.

"Danni," I said, "I really did believe you wanted me to do that, because that's what you told me. And I love doing it, but it's hard probing away at the darkest experiences of your life." The door had slammed but I had already continued with, "Sometimes it seems like I'm torturing you for a confession that I don't even want to hear, let alone write."

The door had opened again; she stood in the opening holding it until I had finished. "What I said was that I needed you, that's what I said. *You* were my dream; not the god damned book." She was teary-eyed and angry. "Writing the story was just if you needed to do that as a writer for it to be your dream too. All I needed was what I thought you might need as well, to finish out our days living the dream we missed out on earlier. I'm living my dream now, Richard; document it if you must, but for god's sake let's just live this fucking dream. This isn't 'The Day Jack Died' or Henry either!" Having screamed that out, she slammed the door hard, and was gone.

I think, as a simple matter of fact, it *was* the day Jack died. I didn't give a shit about Jacks Winlock, Conway, or Burden anyway. And that was the day I became a full-fledged farmer and racehorse owner instead of pretending to be a fucking writer. I still write—keyboard, or whatever you call it. But now it's just a hobby for when farm work is done and when or if farm work isn't being fun at the moment, or I think I'm getting in Jameson's way. It's just a way to document the dream—as long as there is one.

After I had cleaned up around the house, I got into the SUV. Yeah, we bought one just like the rental which we had driven down here from when we landed in Cincinnati. And yes, we lost our deposit on that one with neither of us giving a damn. It's worked out well for us. Yeah, well, I drove over to the training farm in it to watch Willow work. I was leaning on the rail watching her lightning speed out of the gate to the wire, a quarter mile in what, twenty-three and change. "Wow." Then I noticed Danni was right beside me.

"What're you doin' here, Ricky?" she asked with a questioning look on her face as though we were mere acquaintances.

"Livin' the dream," I said, and she threw her arms around my neck and shinnied up to steal a kiss. A couple trainers and one of their grooms who had been at the rail watching Willow work began laughing and then they started to clap, but Danni didn't care, and surprisingly, neither did I.

"I thought you'd be riding her," I said as we walked back to the barn arm in arm.

"She needs to get used to someone else on her back and Jimmy sits cool." She paused and then turning her beautiful browns up to mine, she said, "I'm sixty-five years old, Ricky, and I don't want nothin' to cut this dream shorter than it has to be."

"Me nuther," I said. "Jimmy looked good up there, but wasn't that a pretty fast work?"

"It was. The fastest so far."

A smiling Jimmy was back with Willow. "She is something," Jimmy gushed. "I tried to keep her from going too fast, but damn she runs easy."

"We'll move on up to a half mile next time, Jimmy." Danni was almost giggling. "I just wanted to get her started out of the gate a time or two first."

Then to me, “She’s gonna win first time out, Ricky and you and I are gonna bet on her and a whole lot of other folks will too, not for the money because she’s going out at a tiny fraction to one; it’s going to be just like a landslide election victory after which everyone brags, ‘I voted for her.’ If they did or not.”

She washed Willow down and I scraped the water off before Danni threw the blanket over her and hooked her up to the walker. I picked her stall as Danni watched and chatted. “I think I’ll leave her here tonight rather than haul her home. She needs to get used to being stalled away from home.” Then, “If you want to hang around till after I’ve rubbed her down, I’ll ride home with you. We can leave the truck and trailer here overnight. I’ll bring her home tomorrow after I check her legs. You wouldn’t mind bringing me over tomorrow, would you?”

This started a new phase of our lives together. I stopped interrogating Danni after that. We just conversed the way happy people do; I wasn’t playing reporter anymore, just living and loving it. I had become a happily retired writer. Danni was a happily retired vet who happened to be training a horse. Together we were a happily retired couple living the dream.

I don’t think about my dad much, and it isn’t usually kindly if I do. But of all the concepts I remember him explaining, attitude correction is the one that stands out. To him, very few useful concepts had a bearing on human beings, even if their etymological origins were based on human behavior. I remember listening to his explanation of spacecraft attitude correction and laughing at how oblivious he was to its human behavioral counterpart. ‘Inertial guidance’ (now there’s a term; inertia doesn’t seem like something that would require much guidance, but it does) systems maintain their ‘attitude reference’ (the three-dimensional orientation of an object relative to its environment in space according to my father) independent of the gyrations of the vehicle itself. But an attitude reference system doesn’t stay aligned forever; it ‘drifts’; the wilder the vehicle’s gyrations, the more frequently it needs realigning. To realign it requires sighting the directions to three uniquely identifiable stars that are in directions at right angles to each other.

For a human being to have his attitude corrected also requires points of reference external to himself; Danni is the brightest of uniquely identifiable stars for me, but there is Jameson too, Jenni, and Blue.

It's strange what an attitude correction can do. Nothing changes, but the shift provides a new perspective. You find yourself in a different relationship to everything around you, and you know where you're at.

I started working on the other house to get it in tip top shape like the place we live in but not without some ulterior motive. I had been working in there off and on for weeks. Danni, of course, knew there had to be a reason, but she was a bit surprised when I told her.

One day when she came over to see what in the hell I was doing and why, she had been compelled to ask, "Why are you doing this, working so hard to improve the old place? I like our house."

"I like it too," I said. "But," I hesitated working on the phrasing, "what would you think of offering this old house to Jameson and his wife?"

"Really?" She beamed, her eyes brightened and her eyebrows raised making me realize I had done something good. "What a wonderful idea. Is that why you haven't had Jameson over here helping you with it?"

"Well, yeah. I wanted it to be something nice we did for appreciation, not just more work. Anyway, he told me he used to work with your grandfather at everything, grooming, training, shoeing, maintenance. He lived here... well, out in the barn. It's his ancestral home too."

"Yes, it is. He was about my age and when he wasn't working, we'd go out by the river together. We'd laugh and play, but he'd catch a catfish or two for grandma while we were out there. We'd watch the bobber bounce and go under. I'd grab the catfish when he pulled it in and then he'd knock it in the head. Work was always part of his fun."

"It would be handy having him right here anyway, wouldn't it? I think that place they live in down by the river must be a shack. They'd be better off here. They could bring their cow, and chickens. I think Jenni would learn to get along with Bugs, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do; she likes it when Jameson brings him over. It would totally free us up too, wouldn't it?" she asked rhetorically.

“You didn’t really think I did all this work just so I wouldn’t ever have to do any more physical work did you? I enjoy doing this kind of stuff in case you haven’t noticed. I like doing it by myself sometimes. So that’s not why.”

“Well, we’ll have to be a bit subtle about it, Ricky. He won’t like taking something for nothing, so let’s put him on salary as caretaker.” She thought a moment. “We’d lose some privacy,” she cautioned. “Did you think about that?”

“That wouldn’t matter, would it? I don’t know about the ‘Missus’, but Jameson is easy to be around. He’s here half the time anyway and he doesn’t interfere.”

“No, he doesn’t, and I don’t think Loretta would either; I don’t know her very well, but she seems nice.” Danni was thinking again; she had a kind of twisted smile. “However, I was thinking maybe, if we were going to get into the nude painting phase of our relationship, there might be an impact on that?”

“I am not a painter, I refuse to paint naked, and I’d rather hold you when you’re nude than doing what I’m not very good at. Johnny already won that contest in case you’ve never figured any of that out.”

“I saw that painting you did of the other Jennifer and in case you thought we left that or your paints at your old house, we didn’t—I didn’t. I’d like you to do one of me some time,” she flirted. “Even as an old lady. We could be discrete though and do that even if the Jamesons were here, couldn’t we?”

“That was a one off, Danni. Anyway, I’m not going into competition with Johnny O without having cased him out first. I don’t know diddley squat about him. He definitely could paint—and ride a horse; I give him that.”

“Okay, okay. Tonight after supper you learn absolutely every detail you want to know about Johnny. There’re some you might not want to know, but you’ll get the whole tamale. And then tomorrow we visit the Jamesons after Willow’s exercise; is that alright?”

“Good,” I said. “How far are you working her tomorrow?”

“A fast half. She’s ready for five eights, but I don’t like working that far on a bull ring.”

“I think I’d like to watch her then, if that’s okay. If you’re stalling her there afterward, maybe we could drive on down to Jamesons’ and talk to them about our idea.”

Supper time came and went. Danni went back to her desk where she had been pouring over some papers, so I asked whether it was Willow's training record. Thankful that she had seemed to have forgotten about the discussion of Johnny O that she promised earlier. I found I wasn't anxious for those details anymore.

"No. Just my retirement information, wondering what the appropriate remuneration would be as a comfortable amount to offer Jameson."

"Aren't you forgetting that it was my idea? I fully intend for that to come out of my account. I'm not wealthy like most racehorse owners but paying a caretaker wouldn't affect my holdings at all."

"Holdings?"

"Well, investments. Stocks, bonds, mutual funds, Microsoft, you know. I haven't spent a lot of what I've earned in revenues, and dividends just seem to accumulate."

"Mine too," she said. "It's surprising how that works; I make as much now as I did before I retired. So how come you haven't wanted to do the paperwork on being the big half of our big thing? I'd like to be a smaller fish in a bigger pond if you're waiting for a statement from me. We wouldn't be balancing who pays for what then. That's kind of a pain, don't you think?"

"It is a pain. I don't really like you saying you're training my horse. She isn't my horse! Blue is my horse. So let's do it right if you want to because I do. Let's merge our finances and when we've got that done, would you please handle it. I hate financial crap."

"We just keep coming up with fun things to do, don't we." She laughed cynically I think. "Let's get our license in town on the way out to Jamesons'."

She rose from behind her desk and grabbed my hand. "So... we were going to have a seance for Johnny O, weren't we?"

"We were," I responded as we sat down on the couch in the living room, but I wasn't really looking forward to learning more sad facts.

Chapter Eight: Johnny O – Part I

She didn't hesitate to begin: "Johnny O grew up in Tennessee," is how she began, "the only son of a very tall cotton farmer and no one – not even, or especially Johnny – believed that he had sired Johnny because Johnny was small and didn't look at all like the cotton farmer. (Full grown he wasn't as tall as me in my teens.) He was abused as was his mother, so she left, taking him to a little town up north of Springfield close to the Kentucky border where her sister lived. He learned to ride a little on the farm. From there it was a short hop for a runaway kid to tracks up around Louisville. He started by walked horses, then began riding some in the mornings. It wasn't long before someone noticed his skill at handling a horse, and he began his apprenticeship.

Johnny rode mostly for one trainer who moved on from Keeneland when the meet was over. Then he got on at a major training track when Keeneland wasn't running and that's where he met, first Daniel Howard my grandfather and then my mom and he rode the races for whichever of them was training. He stayed on at the training farm, but he'd drive hours to get to some minor track to ride for mom or grandpa. With his apprentice allowance he was more than competitive. He was only seventeen or so at the time. Within two years he had his 40 wins and lost the apprentice weight advantage.

"I sort of had a crush on him as a kid, but I was very young, so he didn't even notice that I was around. He was all business when he came to ride, listening to everything mom or grandpa told him about the horse, where to lay in the pack, when to make his move, what horse to watch for cues. After hearing them give him instructions, I'd watch during the race to see if he did what he was told. He did, if it was at all possible.

"That reminds me of a racetrack jockey story that happened to him. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. A racetrack has great stories."

"Yeah, well, they're in the paddock and the trainer tells Johnny, 'place yourself down on the rail as soon as you can after breaking from the gate. Just lay there behind the leaders until coming out of the final turn. One of those horses—Johnny told me their names—on the lead in front of you will bear to

the outside, leaving a gaping hole for you to drive through. Got it?’ ‘Got it,’ Jonny replied. So, the race develops, Johnny’s in position on the rail coming out of the turn and the hole opens up just like the trainer said it would but his horse won’t go through the hole. Watching the race, the trainer’s irate. So when Johnny comes back to unsaddle after the race, the trainer demands: ‘Why didn’t you drive through the hole when it opened up?’ Johnny looked the trainer in the eye and said, ‘Sorry, sir. But that hole was going faster than your horse can run.’”

I laughed; those stories were part of what I liked about the summer I spent at Longacres.

“That trainer never put Johnny on another horse. I think that story says a lot about what being a jockey must be like. Johnny had some good stories. Sometimes he’s start telling them and we would laugh ourselves silly. Both Mom and grandpa said he was what you want in a jockey. He did what you told him to the best of his ability and he refused to abuse horses.

“Mom went west in ’73 I think it was. Without the apprentice allowance Johnny was no longer picking up many mounts, so he came west and met us at Longacres in the spring of ’74. He rode for mom in the mornings and helped with other chores until demands for him in workouts picked up. Mom had ten or twelve horses then and he kept busy exercising her horses in the morning. Then he rode races for mom when the meet opened. He got a few outside mounts when some trainer’s preferred jockey had another commitment. An agent picked him up later and that got him a few more of those kinds of mounts.”

I was just laying back listening with my eyes closed when she nudged me.

“Are you asleep?”

“No. I’m following the story, enjoying it a lot.”

“It’s not so interesting so far, is it?”

“It is. And I’m learning the facts that go into who he was and who he would become, so yes, I am very interested in what you’re telling me and I’m trying to figure out who he is at that stage of his life.”

“Because that’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“It’s what I used to do,” I answered, and then I asked, “Your mom must have taken Gold Run west with her, right?”

“Yes. She took her and Molly; they were mom’s or grandpa’s, it didn’t matter. Goldie was a solid allowance mare—almost stakes level—she placed in a stakes race at Keeneland. That was fun. Johnny rode her. Molly was a high claim horse, usually twenty to twenty-five thousand.

“How did Gold Run get to be somebody else’s horse with that Howard background? That’s what I haven’t figured out yet.”

“That’s kind of a different story, Ricky. The short version is that mom needed money, so she sold her to Tom Blackwell, her biggest stable owner, which gave her cash and day money. To her it seemed like a win-win, but I knew it wasn’t, and I told her over and over when she was thinking about it, but she did it anyway.

“Back to Johnny: I liked him; I always had as a kid. No longer a kid and pissed at Riley and with you ignoring me, I was eyeing him. Mom noticed and warned me off, legitimately, I think. I was fifteen, going on sixteen or thirty-two or something like that.” She interrupted the tale to look over at me and laugh.

“You weren’t yet sixteen yet when we were up at the fence, were you?”

She ignored my question and went on: “I’m pretty sure there was nothing going on between mom and him at that point.” Then, “so this is coming up on the fall of ’75, and you’ve come into the picture even if you didn’t realize it. I had my eye on you. You were the target.”

“But second fiddle to Johnny O even back then? And you wouldn’t be sixteen until the spring.”

“You weren’t fiddling anyway, and neither was he.”

“There is that,” I answered with my own little smile.

“There is! And you’ve never been second to anybody.

“So we’re coming up to crisis time here. Mom has had to tell Tom that Gold Run has bad knees. Her knee had given out during a workout, Johnny said that somewhere around the turn she stepped in some soft going, in a hole or something, and came back lame. Mom worked on her a few days and had X-rays taken before telling Tom. That was probably a mistake.

“She did show them to him, but as it turns out that damned Riley had been telling his pop about how awesome Gold Run was and Jess had buddied up to

Blackwell in the Turf Club telling him he could train Gold Run to be stakes quality.

“Well, she can still run, can’t she?” Tom asked Mom. She told him that she shouldn’t run again—that it would be dangerous for Gold Run, her jockey, the other horses and their jockeys, and everyone else. But he didn’t care at all, not a bit. Mom emphasized that her pedigree was just about a three quarters match of Ruffian, and she’d make a nice broodmare.

“Next day the fight started in again. He had talked to Jess again in the Turf Club and Jess told him that he knew for a fact that Gold Run was sound. He told him that the X-rays were probably just a con game to keep Blackwell as a paying client. So Tom laughed at Mom about the X-rays, the pedigree, and the whole situation. ‘Rabbit Run and Ruffian’, he sneered, ‘are you kidding me? No one’s ever heard of Rabbit Run.’ That’s what he said.

“At that point I put my emotional two cents in there which I shouldn’t have, so Mom is shushing me and arguing with him about how Rabbit Run was... well, you know what he was, Ricky. I told you that whole story except she didn’t tell Tom the part about having to put them both down afterward.”

“Oh, God, Danni,” I interrupted. “I’m sorry again. Here I was up at the fence oblivious to what I should have inferred about the bouncing girl next to me. I was aware of the scuttlebutt about Gold Run’s knees. That was why I was up there, but I hadn’t thought enough about your much better reasons for being there.”

“Yeah. So the fight goes on with him telling Mom, he’s taking all his horses if she doesn’t enter Gold Run in the twenty thousand claiming race for which entries were to be taken the very next day. Mom is screaming at him and crying at the same time. She finally says, ‘Okay, I’ll do it, but you’ll regret it.’ But that asshole doesn’t even know who Regret was... or Ruffian either probably. And do you know what?”

I said, “No,” but I wasn’t anxious to know. “What?”

“The day after the race where Gold Run won and got claimed, Blackwell transferred his entire stable to that asshole Jess Gunderson. I think he planned on doing that no matter what Mom did. The race he forced her to enter was for twenty thousand. He’d bought her for thirty from mom several months

earlier. He had made more than that much difference in her purse monies already. So he didn't care if she got claimed or not."

"Assholes to assholes," I said.

"Exactly," she said heatedly, "Mom had planned to enter Molly in that race, so she entered them both coupled as an entry but when they didn't allow entries for that race, she withdrew Molly." She paused disdainfully. "Do you know what else?"

"No!" I was emotionally exhausted watching her. "Danni, just tell me."

"Those stupid assholes claimed Gold Run out of that race we watched a week later. So now Tom owns her again after paying twenty-five-effing-thousand after forcing Mom to run her for twenty. And to top it off—stupid of all stupid—Jess ran her back a week after that, at thirty-two-thousand, which is when she went down. She ran three weeks in a row on those knees, winning two of them, and broke down."

Danni had teared up but did this laugh as she said, "I remember crying in the movie theatre watching Black Beauty. Real life was a lot worse."

"Danni, for God's sake, Danni. And you want to train horses?"

"I do," she asserted. "Willow. I'll make sure she's sound or I won't run her. And you're the only owner I'll ever train for."

"She isn't mine Danni, she's yours. Maybe after tomorrow I guess she'll belong to both of us, but she isn't 'mine'."

"She will be 'ours,' for real."

"And when she gets claimed? What then? Who'll guarantee she's sound when she runs then?" I asked heatedly.

"We will, because we won't ever run her for a claim. She'll belong to Howard Farm till she dies of old age."

"She may have a very short career then. Most horses have to run for a claim, right?"

"No. She won't. Ricky, someone paid over a million dollars for her as a yearling. She won't be running for any stupid claim. When it's time we'll retire her here and breed her to the best stallion we can afford."

Neither of us said anything for a while and I resisted telling her there were million-dollar claiming races. She recomposed herself started in again about Johnny.

“We got off track there. Sorry. I was telling you about Johnny and I haven’t mentioned how he was involved in all this. It was awful. Johnny was the only one who had ever ridden Goldie until then. He never used his stick on her. He’d wave it up beside her head sometimes to get her attention, but he never punished her, or any other horse. He was gentle. He told me that if the hole moved faster than his horse, it wasn’t the horse who should be whipped.”

“He rode Goldie in that race before the one we watched together. He knew all there was to know about her unsoundness and just eased around to the outside and let her run down the leaders at her own pace. She won easily but she didn’t change her leads as she would have normally. Mom and Johnny were talking about it when they hung the red tag on her and Mom knew it was over. I was just mad.

“Our whole barn sulked around for a week coming up to that race that you and I watched together. Molly needed a race and even though it was for a higher claim than she usually ran for, she entered her for twenty-five, not knowing the idiots who claimed Goldie would run her right back. Molly finished second with Johnny up; I don’t know whether you remember that.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Mom had to let her other groom go because she didn’t have enough horses left. The morale in the McGee barn was even worse that week than it had been the week before; everybody is mad at everybody. Mom’s only other client owned Lucky Lu who usually ran at twenty-five and that client had been a little upset with mom because she had run Molly in the slot where his mare would usually have run, so naturally Mom entered her for thirty-two the very next week, not knowing they would run Goldie right back again, this time in Blackwell’s colors and with Jess as trainer. Riley was the groom holding her in the paddock, right next to me holding Lucky Lu as mom saddled her. So there was a lot of hatred in the paddock.”

Danni stopped talking, staring off into the distance with me watching her.

“Think we should take a break?” I asked.

“No.” She looked over at me. “I think I need to get this out, don’t you?”

“I’m no psychologist, Danni, but it seems like might need to finish.”

“Yeah... so. I knew nothing good could happen in that race. I certainly didn’t want to be over there with all the people and have Riley hanging around

anywhere near me. I asked Mom if she'd bring the mare back by herself; I was heading to the backside. I watched the race from where we had the week before, mad at you for not being there, the world in general, and wishing you were there with me. I would have talked to you then, told you everything.

"And then... it happened just like when you were with me up until that God damned Jody yelled the same damned comment again and forced Goldie over to the rail in front of all those horses with the jockeys not backing off this time. 'Fool me once...' that kind of thing.

"Then... Horses and riders had crashed like dominoes, a thunderous tangle of limbs and screams. God, it was awful. I can't ever the sound of bodies hitting the ground—horses trying to get up but can't. People standing and falling back down, it was endless. I remember a gasp by the race caller and then silence until he finally announced a winner."

She was clearly severely shaken all these years later. No words came to my mind as we just sat there stunned.

"It was like I had blacked out," she said. "And suddenly woke to chaos. Commotion everywhere—people yelling, horses thrashing, the air thick with panic." A horse ran up to where I was standing at the fence, it faced me with its right foreleg up, the hoof dangling, just swinging there. It was Lucky Lou. She knew me." Danni had closed her eyes, tears streaming down her cheek.

"I think we should break." I insisted this time. "Let me put a couple of those scones in the oven."

She didn't respond, just sat there watching me. I needed to move, to do something normal—anything to ease the heaviness. Turning on the oven, I rummaged in the freezer for scones, trying to steady myself. I defrosted them for a minute or so in the microwave, watching Danni. I put them in the oven and came back to sit next to Danni. I had needed the break; it was too intense. I had been urging Danni to tell me the story of Johnny O'Neill for so long. Now I wasn't sure that I could handle it, let alone what Danni had to relive. So far, she hadn't even mentioned how the pile up had affected Johnny.

"I left the fence and ran up to the gap," she said as I sat back down, "And ran over along inside of the fence to where Lucky was standing wide-eyed and snorting. She saw me and stepped toward me. I got a hold on her rein and

held on to her as calmly as I could. The ambulance was over by where the accident had happened.”

She interrupted her story with, “Accident!?! It was no fucking accident!”

Before she could start again, I had a flashback of Danni responding to my having said, “Shit happens without killing people.” What a dumb comment. She had said, “Viet Nam killed people.” When shit happens, people die.

She was continuing, “They were loading stretchers into the ambulance. I knew Johnny had to be on one of them. I was crying without crying, do you know what I mean? Tears and snot are flowing but I’m not making a sound other than cooing a little to calm Lucky. I don’t know how long it was, but it seemed like right away Mom was there with me, taking the reins. The horse van was there too, for Lucky; Mom and I both got in with her. No one said anything. We all knew what we were doing and where you go to do it. Alex Thompson was in there with us, Mom’s vet. The track vet was busy at the scene.

“‘Is Johnny dead?’ I asked Mom. My words barely came out. I braced for her answer, hoping, dreading—needing to know, and loving him all at once.” She just shook her head, ‘I don’t think so,’ she said. I asked her whether he was in the ambulance. She nodded. “Did he say anything?” I asked. She wagged her head. We were back behind the parking lot by then; the three of us backed Lucky Lou out of the van. Alex took her saddle off and then put her down. Mom and I just stood there holding each other, crying by her corpse. Alex handed Mom the bridle and left with the van driver. He took the saddle, the girth, and cloth with him. I think there was a third horse that was destroyed that day.”

Then, after we had sat there silent for some time, she asked in a somewhat different voice, “Do you know how many horses they put down during Derby week at Churchill Downs? Twelve. Twelve—gone like they were nothing. She was silent again for a moment. “Well, do you?”

There was a ding from the oven; our scones were ready. I said, “Yes, I heard that.” I gave Danni my hand; we went over to the breakfast nook table and ate our scones in silence. She had promised to tell me everything there was to know about Johnny O’Neill. We hadn’t even started.

“You want to continue this here or back on the couch?” she asked.

“Are you up to continuing this tonight? We can finish another time.”

“It needs to get done,” she said. “Let’s go back to the couch.”

“Situated back on the sofa, she started out with, “Mom had to talk to Lucky Lou’s owners back at the barn—I have no idea what she told them, I was crying on that cot in the tack room. But it didn’t seem like they were mean. After they left Mom came in and we cried in each other’s arms again.”

Danni and I settled into the couch again, the weight of her story pressing down on both of us. She drew a deep breath, her fingers twisting the edge of a throw pillow, and began again. “Then we went up to Valley General hospital and asked around till we found someone who knew what Mom was asking. Johnny was in emergency surgery. We were shown a private lounge and told that the surgeon would talk to us as soon as the surgery was over. We were there for hours. We saw Terry Madsen walk out with a cast on his left arm, with black eyes, bruises, and a bandage on his cheek. He said, ‘They told me that Jody will be alright; just a broken leg and some ribs.’ He evidently thought we were there for that asshole. Mom asked about Johnny, to which Terry’s response was, ‘Oh, I don’t know.’

“When the doctor finally came out it was nearly midnight. He told us that Johnny was in a coma. He would be kept in that state indefinitely until they considered him out of danger. The pain would be intolerable if he were conscious. ‘Indefinitely’, I didn’t believe they could do that to someone. What if you want to say something before you die, or just look at somebody. So, Mom and I went up every evening for a week or so until Mom said she saw no point in doing it. I had got my driver’s license right after my birthday that year, so then I went up every day.

“One day when I walked into his room he smiled at me. It was like the sun breaking through after a storm. Relief and grief hit me all at once, and I broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. I couldn’t stop. All the fear and hope I’d been holding back came pouring out. And love; I really loved him. I ran over and kind of laid down next to him, evidently squeezing a tube that shouldn’t be squeezed, an alarm went off, and the nurses came running to get me off his bed and out of there. When they were done and there had been no damage done, they let me back in with a caution, a nurse keeping a close eye on me. When I was allowed back into the room, he almost laughed, but I could tell it

hurt him to laugh. He talked. The doctors had told him that he would recover; they weren't sure whether he would walk again but the prognosis was positive is what they told him. I held his hand then and I think we both liked that.

“So I continued going up every day; some days mom came. After a month they transferred him to a rehab facility a little further away, but I still went every day making private plans on the way there and back that I never disclosed to anyone. I saw Johnny as my destiny. When he was well enough and could get around with a cane, I convinced Mom to let Johnny live with us. She didn't like the idea at the time—of him and me living in the same house. But I convinced her that we had been living together at the rehab facility for weeks, so what the hell?

“After the track closed Mom stayed in town with us taking care of Johnny. She stabled Molly at a local horse farm, and we'd go out to see her fairly often; I'd ride her on their track when we went. Johnny used his cane for months, but he could get around with it pretty well. Before too long he was insisting on getting on Molly. It was early spring the next year—'76, I guess that would have been. He was working on Mom to let him ride Molly to leg her up when the track opened for training. He still had a limp, but he could ride; he was working to get the strength back in his legs. Mom was working with him too, massaging him I think and then it became more than that. I walked in on more than that.

“I just turned around and hitched a ride back here to the farm. That was a hell of a trip with a very wild story, but until I hear about all those women you're afraid might show up carrying AR-47s, I'm not telling you about it.” She laughed.

“Nah; that was just illusions of grandeur and delusions of persecution,” I corrected.

“Well mine weren't,” she said. “That kicked off what I'd later refer to as my 'wild phase.' Late nights, fast cars, bad choices—anything to distract me from the mess I'd left behind. I didn't know who I was anymore, and I didn't care. Anyway, when I got here grandma Maybelle called Mom to tell her I was alright. Evidently Mom had been calling every day since I left; she told grandma to tell me that she was not 'with' Johnny such that grandma put quotes around the 'with' with her fingers like, but yeah.

“The meet opened, and Mom only had Molly left to train. Molly was a pro, but age or injury had slowed her down, and Johnny’s struggles as a rider didn’t help. Her wins were fewer, the purses smaller. Molly was no longer a twenty-thousand-dollar horse; she ran for claims somewhere between twelve-five and sixteen. But she was still in the money most every time, and mom picked up a client with a few horses that won a few races, so she was making ends meet through the summer and into the winter because the meet was open into late fall—November that year, I think. She opted to spend the winter in the northwest. Johnny had an opportunity to ride for a major trainer at Bay meadows, so he headed for California.

“But Johnny came back in the spring to exercise for Mom and a few other smaller trainers. He was riding races for Mom again when the meet opened. I think things were going fairly-well for her; she kept asking grandma to tell me to get back there to help her, but I wouldn’t budge. My grandparents were getting old; their health wasn’t good. I think grandma had developed a kind of cancer and grandpa had a pretty-serious heart condition. The wildness of my previous year tapered off a lot with me worrying about them.

“After the ‘77 meet at Longacres Mom headed south to Bay Meadows with Molly and a couple of clients horses. She did okay, I think. Johnny still rode most of her mounts, but they weren’t cohabiting anymore. She tried a couple of the tracks further south, but it didn’t ever work out for her at those tracks. So she went back to Renton and the Longacres track in the spring. She started the meet out alright, winning a couple races right off but she lost the client who had been sticking with her, so she was down to just Molly.”

I said, “Molly seems to have been the most permanent horse in the stable; mid-range claiming horses tended to change owners pretty often. Your Mom must have been careful to enter her where she could win but not get claimed.”

“Molly was special. She was Howard farm through and through. Grampa always bred Manny O’Mar to any stud horse handy, so she’d be available as a nurse mare. It was January and cold out when she foaled; grampa was down with the flu, so I went out late one night to make a last-minute check and she was sweating and circling her stall ready to foal. I stayed there with her till two or three in the morning when she finally had Molly. I had to help pull her out and watched her get up and stagger around until she found a teat. I called

her Molly right off and so Grampa put in for the name Molly O'Mar when he registered her.

"No one had needed a nurse mare that spring, so Molly had a pretty normal young life—until Gold Afloat foaled later in April. They had to put Gold Afloat down afterward. Manny O'Mar accepted Gold Run as if she had been a late twin of Molly's. They'd both be nursing on opposite sides at the same time. The cutest thing. No sibling rivalry there; they were friends.

"Manny O'Mar was old; she died a year or so later. Molly outran her pedigree. She and Goldie were the last homebreds of Howard Farm.

"I think one has to add up all the reasons for Mom being despondent. It included Viet Nam, Gold Run and Lucky Lou, her wild-ass daughter, losing another good client, and she and Johnny not getting along very well. Johnny was finally being recognized as the good rider he had always been. After he won a big stake race all the trainers started using him. He still tried to work Mom's horses in, but he had an agent who turned Mom around a time or two and she did not take kindly to that. The breaking point came when another of Johnny's mounts went down in a race, shattering more of his bones. They rushed him to Valley General again. This time something in Mom snapped."

"She refused to even go up to the hospital to see him. Then the very next morning they were calling races and Mom went up and entered Molly for five thousand. Five fucking thousand, got her claimed, and flew home. I told you how mad I got at her for selling our families fifteen-thousand-dollar horse for five thousand, but what I probably didn't tell you was why I really screamed at her, and that was for leaving Johnny alone up there in the hospital. That was late summer '78. I couldn't take Mom's behavior anymore. The way she'd abandoned Johnny, the way she'd sold Molly like she was nothing—I felt like I was losing everything that tied me to my family, to my past. And so, that next morning I booked a flight to Seattle. I was going to fill the hole Mom left behind, for Johnny's sake and mine."

"Would you like to finish this story of Johnny O some other time?" I quizzed. "It really is fascinating, and I want to know about all the rest, but that might take us into next week," I laughed.

"Let's get this over no matter how long it takes, okay. I'd like to unload some of this baggage," she insisted.

“Okay, good. I’ve been needling to find out about all this ever since I received that Facebook friend message out of the blue from a Ms. O’Neill.”

So she went on: “I rented a car and went directly to the hospital. I asked around for his room, but I found out that he had already been released. It was late so I slept in the car at the hospital parking lot. At sunup I drove on down to the track. The guard at the shack recognized me right off and wanted to know about me and Mom and how we were doing. I lied and then asked him if he knew where I might find Johnny.

“After recounting the latest accident and starting into previous disasters, I stopped him. ‘I know all that,’ I said, ‘but do you know where I can find him now?’ He started in again about how he had come in yesterday on crutches, his arm in a sling; said he was going down to Willie Anderson’s barn. ‘That was probably because Bridal Bunny was the horse that fell with him, but she hopped right back up.’ He actually laughed thinking that his phraseology was humorous. I just said thank you and went on through the gate and down to Anderson’s barn.

“Everybody’s trying to stop me to talk about us McGees. I just waved to them and kept on walking up to the north end of the barn area. Down that sweet smelling road I passed riders on their mounts heading to and from the track, some were led by grooms, some with a pony girl, pony horses, and wheelbarrows of stall pickings being dumped. There was the whistling and comments being passed back and forth. I was back in my element, but I just kept walking, nodding to the people I knew, till I was standing in right front of Willie. He looked as if he’s been expecting me. ‘Johnny told me yesterday that you were the only one he missed up there in the hospital’

“Where the hell is Johnny?’ I pleaded.

“Oh,’ Willie laughed, ‘he just hobbled on up to the kitchen to get him something to eat. He said that the hospital food is awful. He’ll be back.’

“I had already turned around and was running back toward the kitchen, but when I turned the first corner around his barn, I saw Johnny hopping along like a bunny on his crutches as fast as he could go. I was laughing and crying at the same time. We collided and I hugged him until he said, ‘Danni, you’re hurting me.’ We were laughing like kids as we hobbled along together back to

the kitchen to finish his breakfast. Someone had run into the kitchen to tell him I was on the backside looking for him.”

She had slowed her talking then as fit that phase of her story. All I could feel was happiness for her all these years later, some admiration for Johnny O too. “I couldn’t have written such a romantic story so well,” I appended to her tale. I knew it was just the beginning of that tale, but it was a good beginning.

“This was the beginning of good things in my life,” she continued. “All our track friends came by the kitchen to interrupt our breakfast with all the pleasantries.

“Upon leaving the kitchen, we walked on out the gate to my rental. He suggested we return it right then, so I drove him around to where he had parked near the front gate, and he followed me to the airport and asked me to drive his fancy rig, directing me to his condo overlooking Lake Washington. ‘Fancy,’ I said, to which he told me that his ‘total disability check’ from his previous accident had paid for it and he was on two-thirds salary now. ‘So, let’s have some fun,’ he said, and we did just that; it was the most relaxed fun I’d ever had. We just hung out, neither of us working or worrying about it. We went to the races if we felt like it, the backside sometimes, a movie now and then, and out to dinner every night, always together.

“Gramma Maybelle died that fall. Johnny suggested we fly back for the funeral. I’d been worried about Mom and him, but he assured me there was nothing between them. That time I had caught them during a massage that had turned into something more, had never happened again and wouldn’t. So we went back and spent some time here at the farm. Mom and grandpa were great. I was so sad about gramma but happy about everything else, Johnny and my relationship in particular. Jameson was saying, ‘Two peas a pod’.

She laughed, and having heard that expression from Jameson’s lips, it helped me more fully understand the situation.

“Mom went over and stayed with grandpa in the old house and let Johnny and I have this big house. We had great holidays that year. But then right after New Years grandpa had a massive heart attack. He died a week later. That was terribly sad. It was awfully hard on Mom—more than it had been when gramma died. She was an orphan now is what she said, and I didn’t fully understand how hard it had been on her, but she couldn’t shake the grief

and depression. Then one morning she didn't show up for breakfast, so Johnny went over to call her. When she didn't answer, he went in and found her. She had emptied a bottle of aspirin.

"It just kind of piled up on me I guess: Grief, guilt, clinical depression. It took a while. Johnny kept close tabs on me and did a good job of it. He stayed upbeat, sharing only the good news he thought I needed to hear. That included telling me I'd inherited Howard Farm—and that Grandpa had somehow built a tidy nest egg along the way. I think he had been a very smart person; he could do anything and do it well. That evidently included financial investments. He left some to Jameson—not much, not enough.

"None of that mattered to me at first; it was Johnny who forced me into deciding what I wanted in my life. 'You can do anything you want,' he said. 'We can both afford it. What would you like to do with your life.'

"Now that was a great question at that time, don't you think, Ricky?"

"Yes, it was," I seconded. "Just the upper you needed then. I wish I had thought about my future like that way back then."

"We started talking about possibilities beyond racetracking for the first time in our lives. I told him I had always admired vets and wished I could be one. He just grinned and said, 'Then do it, Danni. What's stopping you?'

"What began as a vague notion grew into a determined plan. The vets I had known out west had all gone to Washington State University, so I applied—and to my amazement, they accepted me for the fall quarter. Mom had insisted I get a GED, and somehow, my background and passion for veterinary medicine carried me through.

"So, yes, it would have been fall '79 like you said. Richard O'Hare had already made his exit, as if stepping offstage as I entered."

"Pretty dramatically stated, I would say," is what I did say, laughing at her dramatization of our near miss at university.

"Whatever," she said as she rolled her eyes.

"So I started nudging Johnny into thinking about what he wanted in life. What would he most want to do if he wasn't going to risk his life every day? When he admitted to wanting to paint, especially horses, it made perfect sense. He'd always been good at drawing; he had made a few sketches of me as his nude model. And he had painted those pictures of Rabbit Run and Gold

Afloat earlier that we both thought had been well done. So it made a lot of sense. I convinced him to apply to the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, and to no one's surprise, he got in too. So we lined up Jameson to keep an eye on Howard farm by looking in every now and then which he always has. I don't know why I didn't encourage him to just continue living here, but I didn't. I should have. Grampa should have left the farm to him. Hopefully we can make up for my negligence back then. I was young you know."

"Yeah. We think differently now than we did when we were so young," I acknowledged.

"We pulled up stakes and headed west again. We found a nice apartment right near the arts college in Seattle. That was my home, but I dormed over at Wazzu. I drove back and forth quite a few weekends each quarter and spent the holidays with Johnny. I took my undergraduate degree in general science; my major was in psychology. I loved school by the way; didn't you, Ricky?"

"I did. I remember it as years of enlightenment, I guess one could say." That was my immediate answer. But it triggered a cascade of thoughts on that subject. "It opened up so much of the world that I hadn't been aware of. Changing from math to philosophy when I went to Wazzu and having to take all the humanities made me aware of humanity. I think my dad should have had to take all those courses instead of just engineering. They had to take a smattering of humanities, but evidently not enough if my dad is representative. I remember sitting in a class on the philosophy of David Hume in which there were two engineers that sat right up in front of me. Whenever the professor mentioned 'causal relationships', these two guys would titter back and forth between themselves about their 'casual' relationships and laugh loud enough that on occasion the professor would accost them."

Danni laughed. "If I am not mistaken, you learned more from those two engineers than you did from the professor."

"I guess maybe I did, didn't I."

"Anyway, that was the way our lives went for the next few years. I knew Johnny had some one-offs with classmates. A nude model in particular, but I knew he still cared for me. He confessed readily. Johnny didn't know how to lie. He said something like, 'I've never been a contract rider, Danni; I ride for

whoever needs me.’ That led to the only fight Johnny and I ever had. It ended with us signing a marriage contract. And do you know what, Ricky?”

“No, but I have a good guess,” I said. “He didn’t ever cheat on you again, did he?”

“No. You are absolutely right! I love you, Ricky.”

So now I knew the story behind the story of why Danni had enrolled as an underclassman as McGee and in vet school as an O’Neill. I was wondering still about those drawings of her as his nude model. Whatever happened to them—would I ever see them? It would be too distracting to have asked about them then. I also pondered briefly on the matter of her motivations for signing a marriage contract, a reality that would play out again tomorrow. To keep a man from cheating in the one case and finances in the other? Where’s the romance in that?

“We both took summer classes, which allowed us to graduate in ’82. I earned a general science degree, and Johnny completed his degree in visual arts. Neither of us was employable in our respective fields without some further schooling.

“I was accepted by the veterinary school directly and Johnny got a job working with livestock cared for by the vet school staff. Gradually he worked himself into that different roll because of some rather amazing sketches and paintings he did of the animals at the school. Several of those still hang in hallways at the vet school. He was finally recognized for his abilities. He was fast at capturing the essence of the animal. He had done that one of Rabbit Run before his schooling from a couple photos mom had. I thought he was amazingly skilled at what he did and so did everyone else.”

“He was,” I acknowledged. “I really like what he did with Rabbit Run.”

“Bunnies,” she said. “Rabbit Run, Bridal Bunny, and him hippity hopping along on his crutches.” She laughed just thinking about Johnny.

“It’s a theme,” I laughed. “I assume there were no Playboy bunnies?”

“No, none of that kind.” She looked down at her watch and seemed to be shocked at what she saw. “Shall I continue the story of Johnny O on through my vet school years and beyond or should we place it on hold? We’ve been planning on beginning our own brand-new relationship tomorrow and it’s getting late.”

“Yeah. We’ve got a lot going tomorrow and we don’t want to be too tired to suck all the juice out of it,” I said; it was late, so we headed off to bed and slept really well.

Chapter Nine: Bringing Things Together

We were both antsy the next morning with the realization that this was the beginning of a big day—our big, big new life. Danni had gone out to give Willow her oats before our own breakfast, which would be lighter and faster than our usual farmhouse breakfast. Then we loaded Willow into the trailer; I drove the pickup and trailer over to the training farm with Danni following in the SUV.

Jimmy was there and ready, excited about the coming work. Danni did last minute checks on Willow's legs and then wrapped them for protection during the work. This included for the first time I had seen her doing it, a pad with tape around the rear fetlocks. The work after those lengthy preparations was fast, 47 seconds and change, which on a three-quarter mile bull ring was very fast. Danni was pleased, but I could tell she seemed a bit apprehensive.

I remembered from so many years ago that as it got closer to the meet opening, trainers tended to be more on edge. It affected everyone at the track whether it was that the new two-year-olds were starting to get sore shins, or just demonstrating that they would not be the next stars of the stable, or older horses coming up sore from the faster works, getting ready for racing. I could sense now that same crescendo playing out in her role as a trainer. But since everything was going well with Willow, I thought it might have something to do with formalizing our marriage.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked as she knelt feeling Willow's shins and tendons. Oblivious, Willow yanked on the hay in the net that was hanging above Danni's head, shaking the alfalfa leaves so that they fell into her hair.

"No, no, she's fine. Just making sure."

We had been there an hour or so before she was ready to go on into town to complete the rest of our agenda. We were probably thinking very similar thoughts about what we planned to commit to paper. We had both pretended that it was merely a financial arrangement. It was much more than that.

On the way into town, Danni asked, "Do we need gas?" as she looked over at the gauge.

“It’s over half,” I replied. I pondered whether she was thinking about the gas station coming up on the left side of the road, or just trying to slow things down. I wondered why there is no GoTime chain doing business in the west? ARCO is big in the west.

“Oh,” she interrupted my wandering thoughts.

We had proceeded down 89, which had become Main Street, when lights began flashing. An ambulance turned in front of me, headed up Carhartt toward Mercy Health Hospital. On the left, a brick substantially-columned First Christian Church caught my eye. Are marriages merely a religious affirmation of the mating ritual. A watch-for-deer warning sign stood there on the right, right in the middle of the god damned town of Irvine.

Danni laughed nervously, “You went through that red light.”

Then the Irvine United Methodist Church was on the right. Post Office on the left. “Should we have lunch at the Cabana or the Steam Engine Pizza joint?” I asked Danni.

“Ricky! Are you worrying about this marriage thing?”

“Are you?” It seemed as though we both were taking this next small step for man a little too seriously. But maybe that’s how seriously we should have been taking it. Maybe it is a big fucking deal.

“No. I’m just anxious. I think we should just do it before you run any more red lights and end up killing us. I assume it isn’t the fifty dollars that’s bothering you since we’re just doing it as a financial arrangement.” Then she began laughing nervously.

“I’m good,” I lied. There was the stone brick Estill County Courthouse right at the center of town on 89 slash Main, a block before the bridge over the river. I turned left on Broadway to park right in front of the side entrance.

“Well, are we going to go in?” She already had her door opened and she was laughing at me. “You take me to your bed the day we meet after fifty years and now after almost a year of sleeping with me every night and us totally in love with each other, you’re still undecided about whether you want to do this? Are you and Jennifer even divorced?” she taunted.

“Jennifer and I were never married,” I said with an edge. “Thank God. And for your information, Amanda, who was my very first (and my only—previous) wife, and I were in fact divorced many, many years ago.” I corrected

her but still sat with my hands at ten and two on the wheel. “That’s not it at all. I love you; I really do. The thing is, Danni... Are you sure you want to saddle yourself up with an old man who can’t even comprehend your dreams? I mean really? I only slow you down. At some point you’re going to want to disentangle from me. Why would you not? And I couldn’t handle that.”

“No, I fucking won’t. Ricky, you’re the dream I want to ride off into the sunset with. You! I want you—I always have and always will—this has nothing to do with finances. I love you. Now, for better or worse, you better mount up and start riding while we’re still young. C’mon!”

So in we went arm in arm, got the form, filled it out at a side table, Danni exclaimed “Done!” after signing Danielle M. O’Neill at the bottom of the form and, slid the sheet over to me for the Richard T. O’Hare.

“So what’s the M for?” I asked, “Maybelle?”

“Yes. And the T?” she wanted to know.

“Theodore—Mom’s father I never met. Must have been a hell of a guy.”

Neither the M nor the T were worth pursuing any further at this juncture.

“Are we married now?” Danni asked the clerk when she handed her the completed form.

“Not yet,” she said: “The only other requirement in order to validate your marriage is for at least two other people to witness and someone to solemnize your marriage ceremony to be present and sign.”

“Are you able to ‘solemnize’ marriages? Like, if we get the witnesses?” I asked.

“Yes, I happen to be qualified to do that, for a charge, if you like. But you still need the two witnesses.”

“We’ll be back,” Danni said, and we hurried out the door to our next item of business.

In the car I said, “What I remember is, ‘tuther side dah rivah ova Joseph’s bridge. Ro Valley Way.’ Does that ring any bells.”

“Yessah, it do,” Danni mimicked. Get us over that bridge, then turn right on Richmond Road, right again on Rio Valley, all the way to the end. I hope Loretta is willing to stand with us; Jameson will.”

I was sidetracked again: “If she’s Loretta Jameson, then he must have a first name too. You know what it is?”

“I don’t, but I’m guessing it’s James,” Danni said.

“I’m guessing that’s his father’s name instead,” I laughed, “because he is James’ son. So you’re guessing the father, and the son are one. Is that it?”

“Just drive,” she said.

At the GoTime station I turned off to the bridge, on over the river and around to the right and then right again to the end of the road to Jameson’s ‘lil shack’.

“This isn’t a shack,” I said. “They have it fixed up nice. You think they’d be willing to pull up stakes?”

“We’ll see,” Danni said. We were on the front porch ringing the doorbell with me looking up at a blue ceiling when Loretta opened the door.

The conversation started awkwardly as all conversations do and quickly became comfortable as they are supposed to. Jameson had been out in back working at something when we got there, and he immediately put everyone at ease including Loretta. Danni broached the marriage issue. They both bubbled with enthusiasm for us with Loretta bemoaning that they had never actually done it, and she certainly wished they had. Jameson saw humor in it, but when Danni convinced Loretta that we should have a joint wedding down at the courthouse, Jameson allowed as how, “It might be good to do dat. Need my church tie,” he said, and then Loretta hurried off with him to “fix up a bit.”

So they followed us back to the courthouse.

Danni told the smirking clerk, “We drummed up some more business for you.”

Loretta knew the clerk from church so there was some happiness shared in that regard. Jameson told the clerk that Danni was ‘da las a dem Howards. Fixin dat place up rite smart.” So we waited for them to pay the fee and fill out their form before the clerk took us into a little more private room where I paid a ‘solemnizing’ fee, and she asked whether each of the parties to each partnership were in agreement. We all signed both forms avowing same. Jameson’s first name was duly recorded as Jim, Jimmy to Loretta, and we were done.

“How about celebrating over lunch at the Cabana. My treat,” I suggested and all agreed.

So after a very pleasant lunch Danni addressed the employment issue if somewhat awkwardly. “Ricky and Jameson fixed up the old Howard house, and it is our intention that it be your house, Jameson. If it is at all possible to work it into your plans, we’d like it if you would agree to be caretaker of the farm. We’re amenable to any financial arrangement you think is fair. This is a figure that Ricky and I discussed,” she told him, showing him the figures we had written out, “but we’ll gladly up it to make it more persuasive. You are as much or more a part of Howard farm as we are. We would really like it if you would both consider the place your home as well as ours. We plan to leave it to you both if anything were to happen to us since neither of us have family other than you.” As a humorous aside she added, “we seriously doubt whether our union will result in children.”

Both Loretta and Jameson sat silently staring.

After the long silence, neither Danni nor I knew whether our offer had been perceived as humiliating or what other reaction could be responsible for the silence. Finally I said, “Why don’t you both follow us out to the farm. Loretta, you need to see the place that Jameson has spent so much of his time working on thinking it was just on our behalf.”

Still they were silent. Danni added, “Why not just ride with us in the SUV and we can bring you back here for your car when you’re ready.”

“We should take our car doncha think, Jimmy?” Loretta insisted.

“Yezum, I do,” he said. “But I wud like Lohretta to see da place,” he added looking from me to Danni.

I picked up the tab and paid at the counter on the way out.

“What do you think?” Danni asked when we were in the car.

“That was like pulling teeth, huh?”

Danni expressed her concern: “I don’t think they were offended, do you? I’m afraid that maybe they thought we were condescending. I hope not. They know I’m black.”

“What? I’m as black as you are, and me and Jameson are like brothers.”

Looking in my rear-view mirror, I could see they were following. “If they don’t turn off at the bridge, we can talk about all possible options when they get to the farm with us.”

With her neck craned around until we passed the Joseph bridge road, Danni said, “Well, they didn’t turn off to the bridge. Good. I think we may have underestimated how nice they have it set up at their home. But... they could probably rent that place out pretty easily for monthly income. But that’s none of my business,” she concluded nervously.

As we turned onto the Old Fox Road heading for Howard farm with the Jamesons right behind us, I blurted out, “Thank you for wanting to be my wife, Danni. I don’t know why I was so nervous about it. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Danni unfastened her seat belt, leaned over and gave me a kiss that made the SUV swerve, and then we were in the driveway with Jameson’s jalopy right behind us. Jenni barked out a happy welcome.

Getting out of their old chevy Loretta laughed as she told Danni, “I see you kiss your man; I feel zactly same way; I tell Jimmy and he say, ‘Nah; they’s peas a pod’ and I don’t know what he thinks we are.” The women locked arms laughing as they walked toward the old house that looked brand new. Jameson and I smiled at each other as we walked along behind the women. Everything was good.

The gist of the matter is that Jameson and Loretta accepted our offers and as we set it up, they soon became co-owners of Howard Farm. Jameson soon became more attentive than we had anticipated or wanted, for that matter. I finally had to tell him that I wanted to do some of the chores myself—that I enjoy it and even though I enjoy it when we worked together, if I’m working at something, that’s just my problem.

But it will be nice to go off with Danni as she follows her dream and not worry about what wasn’t getting done. I may mimic Jameson’s way of saying things sometimes, but I would never underestimate the intelligence of that man. He catches every innuendo.

It was a month or so before they were completely moved into the ‘old’ house on the farm and had their underestimated ‘lil shack’ rented out. There was only one difference around the farm, and that was that we now had good neighbors.

Chapter Ten: Johnny O – Part II

After taking care of our private affairs and restoring the farm back to excellent condition, we were left with Danni's dream playing out in the form of Will of Steel and the mundane rhythm of life on the farm.

One evening Danni sat beside me on the couch, a Thoroughbred Record open on her lap. She lingered on a page far longer than usual before turning it. I finished a paragraph in an old Dick Francis mystery I was rereading, looked over and asked whether something was bothering her. She brought up the issue of the remaining forty unaccounted years of her life and asked whether I still had any interest in that ancient history. Of course I did—do. So she began where we had left off a week or so before:

“Johnny earned his degree and is now employed by the veterinary school as a kind of medical artist. Medical art goes back to illustrations by one Henry Vandyke Carter, according to Johnny. Carter was an English anatomist, surgeon, and anatomical artist who illustrated Gray's Anatomy. Johnny saw himself as the next Henry Carter, sitting in on surgeries with his drawing pad and camera. His drawings were better than his camera shots. Cameras are much better now, and the minimal role Johnny once played in the operating room has long since disappeared. But he was good at what he did. He did portraits too. He was good at that as well.”

I interrupted, “I've only seen the photo of that one portrait of you. It must have been done years after the period you're talking about here. There had to have been many more, I suspect. What happened to them? Why have I not seen them?”

“That profile photo is still on Facebook. There are more. I've hidden them away. Some are in a book of prints published without my approval, but that's quite a bit later and quite another story. Some are stored in my condo back in the west. We need to go back when it's possible to get away for a week or so to arrange the sale of our dwellings and save what needs saving—if any of it does. Don't you think?”

“Yes. I've wondered if, and when, those anchors to the past would bother you. Those images must get saved.”

“Ricky. I know you’ve lived with a lot of women, but I haven’t cohabited with anyone else but Johnny. I don’t know how different you are from other men, but from what I’ve seen of men from a distance, you are different. The difference I notice, and I guess you’re somewhat similar to Johnny in that regard, is that you don’t engage. Like, why would you wonder when I would become concerned enough to mention our places back in Washington without mentioning it yourself?”

“Passive aggression, I guess.”

“No. Not engaging is not any kind of aggression. It’s something else.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s deep within the psyche of Richard O’Hare and we can’t get it out. You can explore that sometime if you like, but I find it rather uninteresting, unlike the story of Johnny O’Neill that we are in the middle of right now. So, please... proceed my dear.”

“First, tell me what you were thinking last night before you hopped into bed. You were examining Johnny’s paintings, particularly Rabbit Run. That was when I realized we had to complete the Johnny O story. Out of curiosity, what were you thinking of those paintings?”

“I was thinking of what you had told me about Johnny and his having graduated from art school and painting horses professionally. I was trying to see the extent to which those two facts showed up in those images.”

“And they didn’t,” Danni inserted into my explanation.

“Exactly. The Rabbit Run portrait stood out because I could see terror in the horse’s eye. It was the look of the injured and I related it to Johnny’s injury experiences. I also noticed the awkward pose associated with the hammock that is not included in the image although I figured it was in a photo that Johnny had used for the likeness. Those were the brilliant parts, but they reminded me of a Nabokov quote: ‘he had the precision of the artist and imagination of the scientist’. And I was thinking how I had always thought of artists as the right-brained imaginative ones and scientists like my father as the precise left-brained ones.

“But looking at his paintings, I got it. It made sense then. What I saw as missing in the paintings was the precision I had expected to see. It isn’t there. The brush strokes are imprecise and disassociated, which didn’t align with what you had told me about him having become a professional painter. The

portrait of you is masterful, if somewhat abstract. The horse images, however, lack that mastery, which is surprising given that it was his profession.”

Danni laughed, “You’re right,” she said. “He was not professional when he painted those images. The one of Rabbit Run was done from a photo Mom had of him in the hammock. I don’t know where that photo is now. Those were mom’s paintings; I think Johnny did them when he was recuperating after the Gold Run disaster. So, yeah. They were amateurish but brilliant before he became professional. I have some of his better work hanging up in my condo that you’ll see when we get there.”

“It makes sense now,” I responded. “There’s something very nice about unpolished brilliance, isn’t there? Why impressionism caught on, I think—why novices like me prefer it.”

That sidetrack completed, we sat silent for a moment waiting for words to come from Danni.

“It was probably what, 1983 or 4 when Johnny first began showing signs of a serious illness. We had never been very sexually involved. However, we engaged in it often enough as a regular behavior pattern, though I would say it felt considerably short of being ‘passionate’. We always used protection when we were in school. But suddenly it stopped altogether with Johnny refusing to talk about it.

“He became listless and despondent. At times he ran high fevers and sweated profusely—sometimes vomited. His doctor was confused at first suggesting that it might be some kind of ‘sexually transmitted’ disease, but not to worry it was “definitely not syphilis or gonorrhea”. He finally diagnosed it as pneumocystis carinii pneumonia—an otherwise harmless sounding term.”

Shocked, I blurted out, “Johnny had AIDS! Was Johnny gay?”

“Yes, he had AIDS.” She paused, breathed in heavily, and acknowledged that indeed Johnny had been gay.

“The nude model...”

“Yes. The nude model was a nice enough guy, but a gay guy. He died within a year of Johnny’s graduation.”

“Did you know that Johnny was gay when you married him?” I had to ask the obvious dumb question.

“I knew I loved him. He was a lovable person, my best friend.”

“Your Mom had known, hadn’t she?”

“Yes, Mom knew. But I didn’t know how much of a thing he had for men until I married him to save him from it. I don’t really think Johnny knew he was gay until art school. He had always known he was different, but I don’t think he knew there even was ‘that’ kind of difference in people. I think he thought it was just behavioral activity that could be changed. That’s pretty much what I thought too. It isn’t, of course.”

“No. But he didn’t have any homosexual affairs after you were married?”

“No. And he had always insisted on using a condom, even though Mom had put me on the pill when I was fourteen. I think that saved me from ever getting it. After I finally learned what it was, I was very careful where bodily fluids were concerned. In taking care of him for years that was important. The CDC identified all major routes of HIV transmission and ruled out casual contact. However, it wasn’t until 1986 that saliva was eliminated as a possible transmission route. During his illness Johnny refused to show affection, which made things incredibly hard for me.”

“So, how did his symptoms progress? Were you his sole care giver?”

“At first his symptoms weren’t too severe, with occasional bouts. But over time, they grew more frequent, though I was able to finish my schooling. Occasionally he would come up to school and sit in on an operation and do a painting. His paintings were particularly good during this period. But by 1985 the acronyms AIDS and HIV became more common knowledge and with it a wave of bigotry and prejudice.

“I got my doctors degree in 1987. Johnny was deathly ill, and I must say I didn’t feel like I was lagging much behind him. I was in bad shape with all the stress of my orals and my thesis, which happened to be the ‘Ailments of the Equine Foreleg’ and should definitely have included an appendix ‘On the Treatment of Patients with AIDS, but didn’t. I had kept all that locked up in a separate compartment inside my mind, and that in itself was very stressful. So when I received the offer from the Pegasus clinic back on the west side of the cascades, I was elated. I had come to hate the Palouse country in and around Pullman. Johnny was glad to be getting back to civilization too.

“The inheritance from my grandfather, which came to me after Mom’s suicide had held out and even grown during my years at school. I had grants,

along with what Johnny had left from his disability insurance and his salary at the school. So we put it all together and we bought the condo in Kennydale just off highway 405. It overlooks Lake Washington. It was beautiful—it still is—but... I do not want to live there now. I love it where we are now, Ricky.”

“I prefer it here too, even over an inherited single story roman brick castle or mausoleum as I see it now,” I responded, more to let her know I was still listening and enthralled than that I was contributing to the information flow.

“Johnny didn’t get to enjoy our new home very long. His most significant contribution of this period, other than always being the focus of my devotion, was the portrait I included in that second message I sent you. I know you’ve mentioned that it must have been done recently, but it wasn’t. I think it was still 1988 when he did that. He was so sick, but he wanted to get it done. The reason it looks ‘recent’ to you is because I probably look as old in it as I am now, maybe older, because that’s the way I looked—the way I felt.”

“Older,” I confirmed her narrative. “I’ve thought about it quite a bit. You look younger now than when we met last year. It’s been good for us living here on the farm. Johnny’s painting is beautifully done; it is so *you* and I remember when I first saw it in the message you sent in which I finally recognized it as the girl you had been. I mused on what time does to a person and how we can recognize the older person, having known the younger one, but not the other way around. I don’t think anyone who saw you only now could imagine the Ruffian you had been. Johnny combined the professional precision and imaginative brilliance in that image.”

“He liked the final product. I think it made him proud to have done that for me; I love the painting. It hangs in my bedroom in the condo.

“I did all I could for him at home. For a while he could manage at home alone while I was at the clinic, he even cooked dinners for us until he could no longer manage. But soon I had to hire someone during the day.

Danni was tearing up. “He died one day while I was at the clinic. Loraine called and said she had had to call 911 and they had come and rushed him to Valley General. Here he was at Valley General again; I think he’d have rather gone anywhere than there. When I got there very few minutes later, they had already pronounced him gone.”

We both sat silently; we had been holding hands through most of the dialogue. So that was the Johnny O of whom I had been jealous through most of a year. I'm thinking aloud, "My God. What an awful life he had." But then I felt Danni squeeze my hand and had to rethink it. "No. His was a wonderful life, wasn't it?" I told myself aloud. "He had your unadulterated love while he lived, and we all must die."

"I think my love for Johnny was largely maternal," she said. "He was so lovable, but vulnerable in always needing me. You are very different, Ricky. I love you passionately" She leaned over for me to hold her for some time. "You didn't need me; I needed you."

Love is like a flux of energy that ebbs and flows at different rates. Sometimes it just drifts along peacefully like the Kentucky River. Other times it gushes like a volcano or cascades over boulders through mountainous ravines. Right at that moment I felt the rush as overwhelming.

"No," I corrected. "I've needed you desperately my whole life. I just didn't know it until you forced me to engage. I like the love we have; the way we do it. It seems so natural just to be with you watching and helping and I know that you're doing that for me too, and we don't keep score, which is different than any relationship I've ever had." We lapsed into uninterrupted silence until I broke it again.

"We've got thirty-five years to go Danni. Let's get through this dark tunnel."

She let go of me and straightened up her body to lean back into the couch, still holding my hand. "It sure doesn't feel like that long. There was a very prolonged period of grief after Johnny died. A couple of friends at work tried hard to get me into the dating game, but I resisted. Sometime in the nineties I met a colleague at one of the conferences I used to attend yearly to whom I was mildly attracted; we communicated for a year or so and at some point, in the middle of that period it flamed up a little bit—enough for me to know he was no Ricky or Johnny either.

"I think when one is in a relationship that lacks passion, one becomes an avid reader. I was that, and Dick Francis, like the one you're reading there," she pointed to the tattered book still in my lap that I had found somewhere in

the house, “became my Race tracker’s Guide to the Galaxy; I bought and read them all.”

I laughed. “You know, when Riley brought me to the track in ’74, I didn’t have a job. I just sat up in the guinea stand watching workouts. Somebody left a Dick Francis book up there; I took it and read it. I liked it, so I started buying them and pretty soon I could start reading one and not even know whether I had already read it or not because they’re basically all the same. A disillusioned jockey or trainer—same basic theme every time.”

Danni was laughing too. “I know. Every one of them starts out like this:” She made her voice husky and mimicked, ““he lifted himself on an elbow after the last horse had knocked him over and trampled him into the mud, and he asked himself, maybe for the first time in his life, why am I still doing this?””

I laughed. “Did you ever watch that documentary of Sir Anthony Peter McCoy?” I asked. “They called him AP—that should ring a bell.”

“No, it doesn’t, why? What’s it about?”

“He’s the winningest steeplechase jockey ever; he won over 4,000 races and was champion rider 20 consecutive years. His secret? His horse would fall. He’d break a collarbone or incur some more serious injury, and all he would do was pull himself up and get on his private airplane to fly to another track to do it all over again. He’s a legend—hence the ‘Sir’ before his name.”

“Sounds like Johnny,” she said, “but usually Johnny couldn’t pull himself up and didn’t have an airplane.” We laughed at the dark humor for a minute or two until she got back on track to continue the story of Danielle O’Neill.

“I think that’s why I expanded my taste to literary fiction rather than just race tracker disaster. But I hadn’t found the novels of Richard T. O’Hare yet.

“Jane Douglas had started training at Longacres before the track closed. I met her because one of her horses had chips in his knee. I was the person you call in such circumstances. In addition to operating on Fast Fella, we discussed how best to proceed, with her not training him until he healed enough to reevaluate. We had these discussions over lunch a few times before the track closed. Then when she would return to her roots in the northwest every winter after the meets closed in the Bay area, we continued with our occasional lunches.

“One time I was late because of some emergency or other at the clinic. When I got to the restaurant, I saw that she had a book on her lap. So I asked her about it casually. She said it was a good read—the kind of book she liked. That’s how Richard O’Hare got placed on my reading list. Later I saw another of your releases and bought it; I liked it a lot. Let me just say that a lot of what I liked was that everyone was different even with the similar voice.”

“So the next time Jane and I were at lunch, I told her that I shared her taste in O’Hare novels. It was late nineties or early twenty-first century when she informed me that he had a local origin. Our favorite author Richard O’Hare had groomed at Longacres. That is when the lights flashed, and bells rang.” Danni did her contagious laugh.

“The age of enlightenment...” I scoffed.

“No. But that was a significant moment in my mind. It became a sort of puzzle. I tried to relate what Richard O’Hare wrote to the Ricky of my earlier infatuation. I relived moments of the pre-Johnny O period of my life. It began a pleasant phase of my life. Friends thought I had found a lover; they told me that, and in a way, I had—I have.” She smiled that dimpled, and now wrinkled, smile. “That minute we had at the fence took on a life of its own.”

I just listened now; there wasn’t much for me to say.

“You told me how you had prioritized you schedule for getting your books published. Well, I am another person for whom that schedule had a very high priority.

“One time you had a signing in Seattle. I was there, skipping a surgery I had to postpone. I remember exactly what I wore. I had shopped for it at Nordstroms, specifically for that occasion.”

“Polka dots?” I asked cynically.

“No, but it wouldn’t have mattered if I’d been standing there in front of you naked. You wouldn’t have looked.”

“I’ll have to disagree with you there. I think Richard O’Hare might have.”

“Well, you didn’t. You had some sexy broad standing there next to you. She was leaning down to whisper in your ear just to show you she had boobs. They were hanging in front of you, exposed like low hanging fruit. With her low-cut blouse, you could have reached there and picked the fruit.”

“What is it with women and boobs. I don’t get it; they wear these V necks to promote cleavage and accuse men of looking for nipples for Christ’s sake.”

“Johnny didn’t,” she laughed.

“No, I don’t suppose he did.”

“Anyway, I got your signature: ‘Thank you, Danni,’ she mocked. With the flourish of your, ‘R. O.’”

“All that for the price of a new dress,” I scoffed. “Which book was that?”

“‘Sometimes A Rose Is Not A Rose’,” she replied.

“Oh. Well, if you believed that you’d believe anything.” I had stopped laughing though. Jennifer the femme fatale had crept into my thoughts.

“I have one question,” which apparently had to wait for her to formulate what was what I had anticipated: “Was that blond with the big tits Jennifer?”

That damned Danni! And my sheepish, “Yeah.”

“I knew it. I absolutely knew it,” she gloated.

“The similarity between her and Jenni gave it away, I’ll bet?” Still my stupid ass laughing to shroud revulsion and remorse.

“Were you divorced from Amanda yet or was she pining away at home alone, just waiting for her man to return from a hard day’s work.”

More seriously now, I answered. “That had been final many years before. I’ve told you that. My dad would probably have said that my behavior was analogous to a series electric circuit rather than a parallel one. It takes more energy than I’ve ever had, to do that sort of thing in parallel.” My thoughts wandered to a night in a hotel room where Jennifer had not been welcomed but had gained access anyway. God! Recovering, I continued, “But you have seriously sidetracked this discussion. Let’s see, that would have been what? Two thousand seven? We’ve still got a way to go on your story.”

“We do, but before we get off of the Richard T. O’Hare branch of our discussion, was there a Jennifer for every book you wrote? Don’t you think there might be another lonely woman out there waiting for her next Richard O’Hare fix? I know you were working on another novel when I happened along. Why haven’t I ever seen it? And how far along is it? Will you finish it? You really should.”

“It’s crap. You provided me the excuse to scrap the whole thing.”

“No! I did not! Where is it?”

“What don’t you get about ‘The Day Jack Died’? That’s it, all he wrote.”

“Oh, Ricky. C’mon! Your stories aren’t serials, they’re parallels,” she smirked seeing the humor in her comment. “And you’re not Jack.”

“I prefer writing your story; there’s a lot more to it. But you squashed it,” I teased, knowing I was being insincere with regard to her story. I was still writing it.

“No, I didn’t. I just told you that you were the dream, not the story. But I can have a two-story dream, can’t I? You have to get back to writing one of those stories or the other.”

“Please just get on with the saga of whatever happened to Danni McGee.”

“Okay. After Danni O’Neill nee McGee had her dream eviscerated by Jennifer, she doubled down on her career and published a couple of seminal papers on shin injuries in Thoroughbred racehorses. Young human athletes experience similar phenomena and have to work through it. My talks were well received at the veterinary academic conferences. Recognition resulted in being invited as a keynote speaker at a conference and ultimately to a position on the faculty of our alma mater. All that was two thousand eight and nine.”

“Sorry to interrupt all the time, but I find that fascinating. What did you discover about shin bucking in two-year-olds?” I asked, truly fascinated.

“‘Shin bucking’ is just the colloquial for spiral hairline fractures on young horses’ cannon bones. Of course you know leg bones are just levers. They break if the weight is too great for the material strength of the lever. So one has to work a young horse up gradually to lay another layer of bone on the shin. This is to strengthen the cannon bone before increasing the stress. So there’s a physical ‘learning’ process that takes place in training young horses. There’s always been a controversy about training horses too young before their bones are fully developed.

“The problem with that is that you have to subject them to workouts early at two before those bones have fully ossified. They will shin buck irreparably if you wait until they’re older. So, the solution is to train two-year-olds, but gradually. You let the microscopic hairline fractures occur and heal, which produces additional bone strength rather than becoming pathological.

“I had done measurements to show that the cannon bone of a horse that is trained up to racing as a two-year-old is morphologically different as a three-

year-old than one of a horse that was not trained at two. The bone on the shin is thicker and of commensurably greater strength due to the healing processes that took place in the hairline fractures when the horse was young.”

Impressed, I said, “That’s significant. You had to have been an awesome professor and researcher.”

“I was,” was her response.

“Did you get tenure?” I asked even though I knew.

“I did,” she boasted.

“So, why retire? You were on a roll. They wanted you at Keeneland, as a vet at one of the most prestigious horse racing venues in the world.”

“Because of you,” and she was about to continue when I interrupted her.

“Danni, I am not the reason for anything. I have spent my life at the fence looking in on what’s happening, sometimes writing about it. But never as an active participant. I’m not a motivator; I’m not the reason for anything. I’m just a voyeur. You needed a better reason.”

“Ricky, what you don’t seem to get is that your way of watching—being a voyeur, if you must—is motivating. Your fans like your perspective on what you see. Anyway, that’s just another red herring. The reason I retired, and I did it quickly with only two months’ notice, is because Jane told me you were back in Renton at your folk’s place—and single. My renters had been evicted six months earlier for uninteresting delinquencies. The contractors had just finished redoing my condo. So I came back home and ‘engaged’ in getting exactly what I wanted because that’s what I do. I highly recommend that approach.”

“So you got online and told me you needed to talk.”

She finished her story with, “I did.”

Chapter Eleven: Will of Steel

Jameson is like the central neuron in an Estill county Kentucky brain, connected in one way or another to all the other Estill neurons by synapses that maintain the connection by repeatedly firing away. How he knows without an iPhone is a mystery, but he knows, and if he doesn't, he by God will. He talks for a few minutes to two or three people in or around Irvine and he knows all there is to know in Estill county. Tendrils from his connections reach outward throughout the state and into the Shenandoah, Carolinas, and Tennessee. A one-man information faucet.

Danni asked me the other day what I think of Ai, and I said a single word: "Jameson."

Confused, she responded, "Jameson?"

"Yeah. He's the ChatGPT of Estill county."

"What?" she exclaimed. "He doesn't even have an iPhone."

"There is that, but the other afternoon as I was picking Willow's stall, he came by, leaned on his pitchfork and started talking.

"Ya no dem folk up Keenelan not lookin ford no Willa Steel cum back."

"Where'd you hear that?" I asked him.

"Is true,' was all he'd say.

"I followed up with, 'But how do you know that to be true?'

"Lohretta say Jonson tell Hebron's step dauter an she toll Miz Talley."

Danni laughed.

"You shouldn't laugh," I said. "Is true."

She continued laughing and relayed an incident that occurred as she was hooking up the trailer and Jameson had come over to help.

"Danl n Maybelle had one good garten oer der by da shed. Big garten: peas, beans, maters, taters, cairts, corn, parznips, good parznips, the lot. Ol man Hansen had har tack wile back. Bad un. Can't yuze da roto no moh. Good roto, till groun real good. Cheep too."

"I had to stop him," Danni was still laughing, "or I'd still be listening. So I said, 'Buy it, Jameson. We need it.' So now we have a rototiller 'an we's gunna hav us a garten wid parznips' and the lot."

I laughed but repeated, “Dem folk up Keeneland ain’t wantin no Willow.”

“Oh, Ricky, quit. Am I going to have to tell Jameson to quit interrupting you when you’re working here on the farm? Willow’s fine.”

“Well, Johnsons ain’t. They’ve got pride. They give away a good for nothing horse for which they paid a million dollars and you’re going to rub their noses in their inability to recognize a good horse. That’s what you’re doing, just so you know. Jameson knows.”

“Well, it’s time they learned that sometimes what does not seem like a rose is in fact a rose. I think you should write that in a book and title it, Sometimes a Thorn Is Just A Rose In Disguise and give Johnson’s a signed copy. Some woman will be glad that Richard O’Hare is back.”

“Just be careful and listening when Jameson has something to say,” was all I could add.

“Okay, okay,” she appeased. “But I’m taking her up there to work on that track Tuesday. I’d like you to come with me to keep your ear to whatever it is one is supposed to keep their ear to. Wes is going to be there to see how Willow behaves, and we both know she will, so Wes will support my request to the racing secretary and stewards. I know you’re worrying about Johnsons but that’s secondary. There was no chicanery in our ending up with Willow; all the papers were signed over properly with no limitations specified; she’s ours and they can lump it.”

“It’s the ‘ground’, I think Danni. I’ll keep my ear to the ground.” I paused in thought. “That makes no sense, does it?”

So we were business as usual heading toward Tuesday. Jameson and Loretta brought in a few more loads to the old house. Bugs was here now with he and Jenni hitting it off and both liking the company. Jameson had rototilled for a garden and Loretta had planted some rows of vegetables with Danni out there helping some.

Everyday Danni either jogged Willow on our makeshift track or took her to the training track to jog or work. On a few afternoons we rode out to the river together and on one of the afternoons after Willow had worked, Danni and Loretta walked out to the river on foot. I think Loretta probably missed living within eyeshot of the river. In any case, the two women seemed to enjoy their time going out there and talked about having a picnic there later in

the year when it got hot. We bought a last ton of hay and straw to last till haying season was in full swing. And before you knew it, Monday night had come and we're talking about what tomorrow will bring.

“Let's take the SUV in case they let us leave Willow overnight. She needs to get used to that. I'll stay in the hay shed across from her stall one night. You can stay in that motel across from the track; no sense both of us in the hay. Then we can take her home Wednesday if everything's okay.”

Loretta and Jameson were up with us at the crack of dawn as we set out to caravan north to Lexington. I had my iPhone with me in the pickup and Danni kept hers connected in the SUV. Our conversations were pretty mundane; I think Danni was more nervous than she would admit. I was remembering the shocking revelations she had shared with me on our last trip to Keeneland and my milder musing about James R. Keene with his devotion to his prepotent Thoroughbred sire Domino and a horse I groomed for a month or two before he was claimed called Domino Theory, who would have been foaled at about the time the US was pulling out of Viet Nam. It seemed obvious to me that the breeder must have submitted the name to the Jockey Club as what he thought to be a clever double entendre, in reference to the sprinkling of Domino genes spread through his pedigree and the debunked theory for why the US ever got engaged in Viet Nam in the first place just to preclude a first communist domino from falling in Southeast Asia.

Danni interrupted my musing with, “Slow down. We're coming up on Veterans Parkway to skirt around Meadowbrook. Then get on 64 to the outskirts of Lexington. I don't know the best route through there anymore but let's stay on 64 till we get to that cloverleaf for 922 heading south and then hop on highway 60 west to Keeneland.”

“Okay. Just tell me a mile or so ahead of each turn. I'm trying to keep moving smoothly; so far, I don't sense any motion back there.”

“No. The trailer has seemed steady all the way. I think she's fine.”

Highway 60 became Versailles Way and turned off on Old Clubhouse Lane where it started to look familiar heading for the Keeneland Track Kitchen. I stopped the pickup and told Danni to lead the way in the SUV. Then in a minute or two we were there. I saw Wes standing by his car. He got in with Danni and we wound around a little more till they stopped and got

out. Wes directed me with hand gestures until he put them up for me to stop. And there we were. The moment had arrived.

Danni was back looking in on Willow, showing no signs of concern. Two or three other gentlemen and a woman had joined Wes as I went around to the rear of the trailer to play my minor role in this drama. When Danni indicated she was ready, I lowered the tailgate, undid the rear support, and Danni had Willow backing out as calm as can be. The guy standing next to Wes said, “Well, I’ll be damned! Howdy Willow!”

That ‘guy’ was Maynard Johnson—former owner and trainer of Will of Steel. He walked over next to her, stroking her with his fingers together and palm open, the way a horseman palms a horse. “I’d say you’ve done an awesome job with her Danielle,” he said. “Her disposition was the only problem, and you’ve clearly mastered that. She’ll win stakes and I couldn’t be happier for you and for Willow. I knew she’d be a good one when we bought her.”

Danni introduced me as her husband and he said, “Yes. ‘The Day Jack Died’ is a hell of a read. Really enjoyed it. The wife’s read some of your others and wonders when there’ll be another.”

Dani responded as we walked toward Willow’s assigned stall. “Bug him about it, would you. I interrupted his publishing schedule a while back now and I don’t think he has any more excuses.”

But that was the extent of my moment in the sun. All the rest was Danni and Willow, who began gnawing calmly on hay as soon as she was in her stall as if it was her usual residence.

“You wanted to work her today, right?” Wes checked and with Danni’s nod he proceeded with, “The track will be open for another, let’s see, an hour and twenty... seven minutes. Lou Graham here (the third gentleman who had held back) is steward; he’d like to see the work. There’s no little interest in this filly.”

“The word has filtered up from the Estill training track that she may be something special,” Lou Graham said.

Danni greeted the steward and acknowledged that she herself was convinced that she is indeed something special. Neither he nor I showed any particular interest in the other and no attempt to change that status was made

by anyone. The group disbursed with Wes saying he'd be watching up at the stands with the others. He walked off with the woman.

Before he left he had told Danni that Jacob Allen, one of Keeneland's leading jockeys the last few years would be down to the barn in a few minutes.

So it's just Danni and me.

"You were worried about whether they'll accept Willow with open arms?" she jabbed.

"You lining me up to write the New York Times best seller, 'Sometimes A Thorn Can Be A Fucking Rose'. God Danni let it go, would you?"

"No, I won't," she mumbled, as she stroked Willows legs before wrapping them. "Not till I have the book in my hands, and I approve it as up to your previous standards." Then, "get me that saddle and blanket in there, would you? And the bridle."

Jacob, a talkative little fellow showed up. "So this is the gal ever one's talkin bout, huh. She's big. Purty too." Then to Danni, "What's the plan for today?"

"I just want her to go a half. She's ready for more, but I just want her to get used to this surface."

"Surface is good," Jacob promised. "Real nice today."

"Just let her go at the half mile pole; she runs willingly, don't ask her."

"Want to work in company if anyone else is going?"

"No, better not."

So Danni led Willow out to the gap. Then Jacob and Willow trotted off, backtracking to about the six and a half pole, where Jacob turned her around jogging over along the rail till they got to the half mile pole where it looked like Willow was shot out of a cannon. Jacob was thrown backward for a moment till he settled down for the ride. The gentlemen behind us both said "Wow!" as one. The woman had joined them; she was beaming. Danni was watching Willow with glances at the timer on her iPhone. At the quarter pole it looked like she had picked up speed even though Jacob was sitting perfectly still on her. Down to the wire at breakneck speed and then she slowed down easily to a gallop and came on around the far turn and by where we were all standing. Everyone was looking at Danni, but Danni was watching Willow.

It was Wes who spoke first. “I got forty-six and change; I’ve never seen a horse do that without even being asked.”

Danni was still silent, all her attention on Willow till she had snapped the shank on her halter under the bridle.

“That’s the best horse I ever been on. She knew exactly what to do, and she’s never even been here before? Ma’am please let me ride this horse in the afternoons. I’ll be real careful with her; she is special.”

I was waiting for what Danni would have to say; she wasn’t talking while the flavor lasted, I guessed. Her smile said it all. Willow and Jacob swayed rhythmically back and forth beside her on the way to the barn. It seems like one yearns for some anticipated event to work out perfectly the way you can only dream it and it never does; something goes wrong – it may not be much, but something. But when it doesn’t, when your dream is for there to be no disaster, a fast time of forty-seven and change, with no soreness afterward, and the Johnson’s being happy for you, it feels anticlimactic, like what-the-hell, when that is exactly what happens. Well... that is exactly what happened, except that it was better than that. Forty-six and change. Marylou beaming.

I got our washing-down bucket out of the trailer and helped Danni, sponging and scraping the water off. We had an audience, but I doubt that Danni, or Willow either one, was aware of them. When we were done it was too warm out for a blanket and Danni asked if I wanted to walk Willow by hand to cool down. I said I’d love to, and I meant ‘love to’, because those who are associated with the ‘big horse’ are privileged and they know it. I knew it. It was like being trusted to hold a trillion dollars, maybe more. The key to Fort Knox. It is just a great feeling to be associated in any way with something so special. As I walked beside her casual stride, I thought of our times with me on Blue and Danni on Willow and what it feels like to bet on a winner. They are similar sensations that make us feel proud of who we are and what we’ve done, but so different, like the difference between ten and ten-to-the-tenth. I am not one of 2,500 owners of a Derby winner, I and the trainer with whom I am intimate own this horse; we take strolls through the beech woods and down by a slow flowing Kentucky river without ever having to win a race with thousands of screaming gamblers to prove that I am directly

associated with the best horse in the world. I can feel her wet warmth right beside me when I touch her. That's what horse ownership should be.

Eventually Danni left the throng that had gathered around her, and came over to ask, "Do you think she's cooled out yet?"

Like... I don't know. It's just me and Willow going for a stroll. "Danni, I love you. Do what you do; I'm just happy to be here doing it with you," I said. And do you know what? She just jumped up on me like she had back at the training track after my attitude correction, squeezed the bejesus out of me, and kissed me dizzy, while I'm still holding Willow, and Willow is watching us, a little surprised just like everybody else.

"God damn it, Danni, not now, not here! What will Willow think?" I dramatized to which there was applause from our enthralled audience.

She took the shank from me, feigning disgust, and walked Willow back to her stall; I brought the rubdown box that she had placed in the shedrow before the work; she knelt, reaching to palm Willow's knees for a few moments then gently ran her palms down the cannons. She was feeling for any unusual heat I knew, concentration showed in her face, but no concern.

"She filled each hand with her unique concoction of rubbing alcohol and menthol and began rubbing the cannons and tendon areas with fast up and down strokes as Willow picked at the hay above her, contented with life as it is. Every few strokes Danni let her palms reach the fetlocks. I remember all that being part of my duties that summer fifty years ago. I liked doing it, even with the continual criticism from Jack Winlock that I didn't do it carefully enough, fast enough, or long enough to do any good. "You have to get heat in there; that's the whole point." I never saw him do it; he never showed us, just criticized us grooms for not doing it right. Not Danni, she didn't trust anyone else to do it, not even Jameson or me.

When she was done rubbing, having knelt on both sides of Willow, she wrapped the cannons in cotton batting, pulled the non-stretchable bandages tight over fetlock bulges and then round and around up to the knee where they were pinned with safety pins. That's probably not exactly the way it's done anymore, I don't know. There's probably an easier way, a cheaper way. But that's the way it used to be done when she worked for her mom the same year I worked for Jack Winlock.

Some things don't need to change. I'd say most things don't need to change. Rubbing a horse down is one of them. It's the major aspect of training, for after a horse works, in keeping them sound. This is primarily using the palm of one's hand with some concoction of alcohol and a trainer's additional whoopeedoo addition that is just some form of menthol or other, but basically, it's to get heat in and get it out of the cannon area.

The palm of one's hand is how one measures heat in an injured area if there is one and how one applies heat by rubbing to promote healing if there happens to be an unseen injury in the making. The palm is perhaps the most important instrument in training horses. There is considerable significance to a trainer having particularly sensitive palms and tactile acumen to understand whether there is a minor ache or pain that the horse has no other way to tell her. It is a major unheralded attribute of every good horse trainer. Danni has sensitive palms and the nerve connections to her brain, plus the concentration to process the information.

When Danni got up, she walked slowly all the way around Willow, her palms in continuous contact with her, feeling the muscles in her shoulders, her back, her buttocks, her hocks, picking up her hind feet, feeling the pasterns, finally she forced an uninterested Willow to hold her head against Danni's chest as she stroked the muzzle. Willow seemed totally disinterested, almost irritated at the interruption from eating hay.

After Danni had crawled out under the webbing in exiting the stall, I showed her where I had set the grain. We had brought the oats, the bran, and molasses, all of which was mixed as only Danni was allowed. She hung the bucket in a corner of the stall with Willow nudging her out of the way so she could eat it on her own, done with people for the day. When we walked into the kitchen, our earlier accomplices had reserved places at their table.

The woman who had been with them watching Willow work was there. Her name was Marylou, Marquart's daughter who had been the one who had persuaded him not to put Willow down after the unfortunate death of their groom. We had a good meal and cheery conversation with our new friends. Marylou had also read a few Richard O'Hare novels, so with Danni on one side of me and her across the table, Danni conducted a serenade of demands for me to come out of retirement and finish that book I had started so long ago

that I had forgotten the plot, and had never given it a title, when they asked me to tell them what it was all about.

I embarrassed Danni by stating that she had sidetracked that effort, i.e., the to get me to write the story of Danni McGee. She acted peeved, to everyone's delight and concurrence that Danni McGee should be Richard O'Hare's next assignment. Danni wasn't really irritated; she was just faking it. I suspect that like me, she was riding so high that nothing could destroy the moment.

We left the kitchen and headed to Woodford to find a motel. It was a few miles away but handy. Entering the room then we had just planned to have a nap but kissing and happiness got in the way of that plan, leading to some 'extra marital' activities, and by saying extra marital I mean only to imply 'marital', as in connubial, but with a little extra flair; the nap was the finale.

I was wide awake before Danni and thinking. You know how some days you wake up and everything is crisp and clear, like a digital video compared to an old analog screen or a smoggy day. It's like that, like when you're young and suddenly it feels as though you know that you are destined for greatness for no particular reason. Because you deserve it. I don't know... you know how sometimes people say, 'and that was the happiest moment of my life' and it's just bull shit, but this wasn't. I was reliving all the happiest moments in my life of which at least ninety nine percent have been since I hooked up with Danni, but if this isn't by some obtuse reasoning the happiest day of my life, it's just because it's been a year so chock full of happiness no one deserves, especially me. But here I am living the dream with Danni naked beside me with a smile on her face even as she sleeps. Nothing, and I do mean nothing could possibly be better than today and yet it feels as though tomorrow might even be better.

Chapter Twelve: Tomorrow

Well, Danni did what she said she would do; after we had supper in the hotel restaurant, she insisted I take her back to the track where she bedded down in the hay across from Willow as the security she had thought might be required. And as planned I went back to my comfortable hotel bed alone.

I was asleep when there was a knock on my door. I made a mistake of opening it a crack without flipping the latch thing that keeps it from opening further. It was the beaming Marylou.

“Hello!” she said pushing the door back in my face.

Confused, I asked, “Is there a problem?”

“Nope,” she beamed, pushing the door shut behind her. “We’re about to solve it,” she said as she dropped her robe in a tangled circle around her feet. “We have to work on your writer’s block issue.” Here standing in front of me was the Venus di Milo only more perfect than that... she had arms, with breasts to die for (that phrase actually crossed my sordid mind), she was a perfect femella homo sapiens specimen.

“No, no! That is not a problem you are authorized to solve,” I corrected hurriedly.

Then it was as if, having seen Danni pounce upon me earlier, she was auditioning to compete for that starring role. She jumped up with her arms around my neck, next her legs shot out straight on both sides of me like a pole dancer. I pulled her arms away, rather terrified. Similar events had occurred in my past that had not terrified me as much as they should have, but to my credit, this one did. With her down off me, I grabbed her waist and pushed her backwards to set her down on the bed. I guess she was surprised enough that she just sat there for a moment. I backed away and reached down to grab her robe, opened it up and held it with the sleeves readied into which to put her arms.

“Put this back on,” I demanded, “and leave this instant or I will throw you out and toss this after you, calling the office if you knock again.”

She rose in a way intended to entice me I suppose, approached and slid her arms one at a time into the wrong sleeves, smiling childlike up at me. I

jerked the robe back angrily, freeing her arms so that she turned around and slid her hands into the correct sleeves properly.

Then she turned to face me, pleading only, "I thought you liked me."

I pulled the robe together covering her still exposed breasts, grabbed the ends of the sash and tied them in front of her.

Pushing her gently then toward the door, I opened it and said, "Marylou, I really do like you. We had a very enjoyable conversation today, but you are much better than this. Have a good night's sleep."

Calm now, she turned to face me again, placed a warm palm on my right cheek, beseeching now, "Ricky, please write me as a good person in one of your books."

"I will," I said smiling, having seen some humor in the situation. "You are at the top of my good person list." I had never maintained a 'good person' list, but now I had one.

Then I pushed her the rest of the way out the door, closed it, set the lock. I leaned my back against the door for a moment totally exhausted. I walked over and looked out the window toward the Keeneland track and thought about the kids growing up on and around the racetrack. I don't know much about Marylou, but it's another category into which I placed her. I sat down in the overstuffed chair there by a round table in the dark. Unfocussed thought, an experience I imagine to be like having had a stroke with inexpressible but thought-like feelings inundating one's being, a sadness settling in like a tide replacing my earlier euphoria. I thought of Danni and her hitch-hiking trip back home from Washington full of disillusion. The story she refused to tell me unless and until I had unburdened myself of the too casual affairs I had had. I did not want to hear those stories unless she needed to tell them, and I certainly did not wish to express all my own indecencies of which there had been too many or the single too well documented incident.

Amanda had been a pretty little thing. 'Thing'? My God! A beautiful person really, an entry on my recently formed 'good person' list for sure, but flawed, with flaws that were too precisely complementary to my own. We identified each other's flaws and wished the other would admit and fix them so that we could enjoy what was so good about us on some occasions, neither of us possessing enough self-awareness or discipline to admit or fix a thing.

And the other merely perfect femella homo sapiens, who like Venus di Milo decorated my various places of residence or single night hotel rooms as objets d'art, without my having interest in the marble from which they were crafted. Elaine and Roberta came to mind in that regard. Retrospect provides a cruel critique to balance instant gratification. And Jennifer, that most perfect physical specimen ever, with flaws so deep it was like a Venus di Milo made of limestone, me so flawed I couldn't even tell the difference.

Everyone is flawed, it seemed to me right then; each needs some work to fix them, and yet everyone is flawed in such a way as to be incapable of fixing the flaws. There is a lonely-hearts club in the Heartbreak Hotels of the world with huge memberships, dating sites franchise that commodity. I remember how my own undirected loneliness lead only to more loneliness. I, myself, had never learned to 'engage' as Danni told me, but I think I am learning that, but also when not to so engage. I congratulated myself. Marylou has more on the ball than most of the women with whom an opportunity like she offered me tonight would have been snatched up in an instant and lasted several days.

Jennifer, that poor sad soul so needy for attention. I could see her even now, naked and banging on my hotel room door as she screamed for me to let her in. And I have never figured out how she had gotten there, how she had even known I would be there. Peekers were at every door down the long hallway, some yelling at her to quiet down, others laughing or yelling lude remarks. Finally I had had to let her into the room notwithstanding there already being a woman in my bed. That was one of those times your mind makes every attempt to forget but it doesn't go away. I grabbed one of those little bottles in the fridge and drank it to drown the memory. But it didn't go away—again. Jennifer attacking that poor girl, me with the phone calling room service and trying my best to protect... Roberta. Yeah... Roberta. I grabbed another bottle and downed it as I paced the room, gradually bringing my mind to a standstill. Slowly I allowed myself to think selected thoughts.

I think of Danni sleeping alone in a barn tonight, probably on the bale of straw I sat on watching her rub Willow down. She is not in the least lonely; she is in the middle of her dream. She had been a racetrack kid who had been severely flawed—maybe not severely—maybe not at all, ever. Empathy had

flowed through her veins even as a kid. She had always had the urge to fix whatever was flawed, even herself, and the engagement to get it done.

She had put in hard years that perfected her, and she is by-God perfected to my mind. I think about what she has done with Willow, with me, and the Jamesons. All her life experiences have gone into making those achievements possible. Everyone else's reactions have confirmed for me what should not have required confirmation. I still didn't completely get it, but I felt as though I just might lick this aphasia thing yet.

I went back to bed then and fell to sleep relatively quickly.

Danni woke me with her call that terminated about seven hours of blissful uninterrupted sleep. "How's everything with you and Willow this morning?" I asked.

"Oh, she's good and feeling chipper, jumping and kicking on the walker when I cleaned her stall. We'll be ready to go whenever you are. Maybe we could eat something in the kitchen before we leave and let Willow digest her morning feed."

So that's what we did and were soon at the kitchen. Wes was there to wish us well and anxious for Willow to return to Keeneland for works and then the races. Marylou was there, cheerful and beaming with no apparent awkwardness; we exchanged pleasantries including her insisting with Danni that I get writing. She hugged Danni and kissed her and then... she did the same to me.

Winding our way through Lexington, I'm confused, thinking of Marylou's inexplicable behavior. No interlocutor I'd ever encountered in a motel room had ever so totally erased embarrassment when we met again. None of them. Roberta maybe. Is it psychopathic? A singularly unique character, certainly worth someone more capable than I am attempting to explore such a character in fiction. I could not get her insistence on being written up as a 'good person' out of my mind. It brought me back to Danni's initial attempt to interest me in writing her story. In fact 'Marylou as a Danni O in the making' stuck in my mind as a string of characters that seemed to belong together. There is truth in them. The commonalities became so obvious to me then.

We were back on 64 heading east about to turn onto Veterans Parkway and thence to 89, when Danni called. “Everything okay?”

“Yep. There’s no motion back there in the trailer.”

“How about last night?”

“I slept well. How about you?” I asked, unsuspecting still. “Did you toss and turn in the hay all night?”

“Nothing as exciting as your evening, I’m told,” announcing that she was aware of what had transpired forthrightly, all the while laughing.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed. “Well,” I was starting to recover, “what did the beaming beauty have to say about it?”

“She was embarrassed and didn’t want to lose you or me as friends. She did explain how gentlemanly you had been in booting her naked body out of your room. I am really proud and happy with you for how you handled it so that we still have Marylou as our friend. I’m glad I had worn you out before she showed you what you might have had instead.”

“Yeah, me too. We had exactly what was called for on that day, don’t you think? It was...” I paused, looking for a word, “spectacular. But it wouldn’t have mattered whether we had enjoyed ourselves like that or not; there is no one and nothing I will ever want but you. I find that I am not as shallow as I once thought I was. You have progressed that far with me.”

Danni got back on topic, “It was just an absolutely wonderful trip in every way, wasn’t it?”

“It definitely was that.” I didn’t feel like ruining the moment by asking what Danni really thought of how Marylou could demonstrate such antipodal behavior.

We just drove on silently then with our separate mind sets in our separate vehicles on down 89 till we were home to Loretta and Jameson congratulating us on the great success that is now known to everyone in Estill county and probably all of Kentucky—maybe as far as the west coast. So, yeah. We’re home.

Things became a little more humdrum for a while; I became confused by what seemed to me to be Danni’s lackadaisical approach to getting Willow up for a race. The meet was opening in a few days; I knew that Danni would not

start Willow until she had at least worked out of the gate at Keeneland one time, nor without having worked the distance she would be expected to race. She had often spoken to me with distain of trainers who did that as putting their horses at risk of serious injury. So one evening I broached the subject.

“Just for information,” I tiptoed into hazardous territory, interrupting her perusal of the April ‘Blood Horse’ issue, “what’s your schedule for Willow?”

“Are you becoming an impatient owner,” she asked, defensively I thought.

“No, no,” I insisted. “I’m just along for the ride here, but I was wondering what some of the key stops are on this tour we’re on.”

“Tour?” she mimicked. “It isn’t a tour, it’s a training approach.”

“Okay, I guess I don’t have the vocabulary down pat, but the Keeneland Spring meet is days away and it’s not a terribly long meet like Longacres used to be. I’m just wondering if you have a date in mind for racing Willow.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t.”

“Oh,” was all I could say to that, but I was trying to come up with a less offensive question to resolve my uncertainty with regard to what-in-the-hell is going to happen in my pretended life as a racehorse owner.

She went on reading for a while, glancing over at my idleness every now and then. Finally, she probed, “Are you bored?”

That wasn’t the question I expected, but I could see why she might ask it. I had to think about it: Am I bored? “Hmm. I don’t know,” I said. “I didn’t think so. I’m plenty happy if that’s what you’re wondering, but I feel like I’m completely in the dark and out of the loop. Not that I think I have a role in the Willow loop, but it affects me, I guess. I have no idea what in hell is going on with Willow. Is she unsound? Do you plan to race her? What?”

She closed her magazine and sat it on the side table next to her. “Can we talk about writing fiction?”

“What?” I exclaimed. “What are you doing? Are we having our first knock down drag out fight of our happy marriage?”

“No, Ricky! No. I’m trying to figure out how to answer your question.”

“By changing the subject?” I am incredulous. “What does writing fiction have to do with the training schedule of Will of Steel?”

“Everything,” she averred, “everything.”

Giving up, I acquiesced, “Okay, let’s talk about writing fiction. Which aspect?”

“There are all different genres, right?”

“Yeah. Romance, mystery, sci-fi, horror, historical fiction, ...”

She interrupted my list, “Within every genre there are two basic types, plot-driven and character-driven, right? You prefer or at least your books seem to indicate that you prefer character-driven novels. Am I right about that?”

“Yes. I have preferred to write character-driven novels. If a protagonist doesn’t undergo a basic change during the course of the book, it isn’t worth reading. It’s that change that matters rather than all the crap that happens during the course of the story that might be what results in the change. What happens needs to make sense with no *deus ex machina* etcetera but otherwise, what happens is just filler.”

“That’s what I thought. So when (if),” she nagged, “you write a novel, you intend to develop your protagonist to a pattern that will interest the reader rather than just having him encounter situations because the situation itself might be interesting. Isn’t that correct?”

“Pretty much. But I’m feeling a little manipulated.”

“I know. I have this professorial approach that’s annoying.”

“No, it’s fine; you have an effective approach to clarifying a topic; I like it. But I think you started this diversion of our conversation with a purpose I haven’t figured out yet. A thesis sentence might be nice.”

“Oh, sorry,” she apologized. “I was just trying to relate your approach to writing a novel to my approach to training Willow so you could empathize.”

“Oh yeah?” I laughed with confusion. “Willow is your novel and it’s not done yet and I should save my criticism until it is?”

“Okay. Let’s get this analogy straight. Willow is to ‘The Day Jack Died’ as Danni is to Ricky.”

I just started laughing and she laughed with me—maybe at me, I don’t know.

“Willow is a character driven novel, Ricky, and you’re expecting a plot driven novel.”

This had turned into the weirdest damn conversation I have ever had. I'm searching for all elements in her novel, and I keep coming back to Willow's cannon bones as protagonists, and that makes absolutely no sense to me until I step back a little, to the novelist himself and there's a dim quavering light bulb of recognition somewhere way back in his brain as the neurons and synapses begin the process of forming a brand-new path. Danni does that to me.

"Do you get it?" she asked at last after having watched my confusion for some time.

"There is no plot to the Willow novel, is there?"

"No," she said, "probably not, but like you said, the events on the plot line only matter if they become essential to development of character, otherwise, they are just distractions."

We both sat together contrapuntal thoughts. Me thinking about her as becoming the foremost trainer in the world in developing the fastest, soundest horse with stamina to go any distance without having to demonstrate it to the world or force it to happen on a certain day when a race is called if there happens on that day to be an iota more heat at any point on the horse's body than there should be. The way a horse should be trained, how Danni thought Ruffian should have been trained. She will work Willow at a pace that develops the cannon bone to the precise morphology required to support the maximum speed she can achieve. Willow will be an unheralded Ruffian into old age. And why? Because it's who Danni is, who she has become, because of where she's been and what she has discovered – the character-driven aspect of my story of Danni McGee.

And Ricky? What of Richard T. O'Hare? Would he write the perfect unpublished, and in all likelihood unpublishable, novel illustrating the full development of character from a racetrack ruffian to this perfection of the fella homo sapiens?

If only he could.

Chapter Thirteen: What Goes Without Saying

One is expected to move something if one claims to be busy, a shovel, a pitchfork, a pan, a pen, a gear shift, a page, a baseball, anything, your lips if nothing else, but something. One does not have a career unless there is some physical transition somewhere for which one takes responsibility, because ‘Idleness is the devil’s playground’, isn’t that the adage? Well, maybe it is, but unless a statement can be denied, it makes no sense to assert it. That is what I learned to warrant my bachelor’s degree in philosophy, it’s what science is all about. All other statements falls into the category of ‘what goes without saying’ or more properly, ‘what should not even be said’, because they are all bullshit. So I’m just going to deny the truth of all that about the evils of inertia and state quite boldly that inaction has value. There, I said it.

We have hierarchically organized ‘civilized’ society to where there is no authorized role for thinking. A manager steps out of a corner office with a thriving elephant ear plant in its corner; he sees an employee sitting at his desk with his chin on one hand, the other hand gesticulating with what is apparently meaningless slow, if any, motion. The manager worries that maybe one of his superiors might walk by and see that one of his employees sits motionless, not realizing that this is his most productive employee because this person thinks carefully about what to do before doing it. There is that argument.

It goes without saying that my writing has fallen into this category, but like the guy sitting at his desk thinking, and about to get fired for it, I’ve been thinking about how to proceed if the proverbial plug isn’t pulled on this whole project. I’m quite sure that I misunderstood Danni’s initial desire that I had perceived as writing the epic story of Danni McGee. As an author who is always anxious for a new story line, I was all over it—annoyingly so as it turns out. I had become a bit jaded with having to make up story lines for protagonists who were nothing more than the pigment of my imagination—now there’s a trite phrase that I see as referring to pigment that is the physical substance of colored paints, so the phrase should mean the physical reality of

an imagined reality, which is kind of nice in its own rite. But that isn't what it means.

And in all honesty, there wasn't much pigment in protagonists like Jack Conway, who was very loosely based on Jack Burden who was a brilliant underachiever other than his successes in dredging up muck for Willie, a power-hungry politician who was screwing the love of Jack's life. That may be a pretty superficial synopsis of 'All The King's Men', but there it is. My chief character in 'The Day Jack Died' was a poor copy of the weak secondary character developed by a great writer. Danni got it; probably no one else did; she seems also to have identified the character based on Lois Seager.

Historical gossip has it that Jack London (now there's another Jack) had a hard time coming up with story lines and bought them from lesser writers. I hadn't stooped to that; I chose a greater one. Nonetheless, given the prospect of a real live and attractive protagonist of my own generation with backstory that at least made sense to me, the opportunity loomed large, a broom handle stretched out to a drowning man.

But like I say, I misunderstood the role I was to play and, to say the least, the role of my new protagonist. It was not vanity prose I was expected to write but a multilevel expose of an entire industry and generation in demise, our heroine the exception to expectation. I admit that I had gone about this wrongly from the start until our real live protagonist put the author on notice that he must himself be more compatible with the protagonist's story because it is after all her story—if it will ever be a story at all. Ineffectually, to be sure, but sincerely I have attempted to do just that. This is her story. I'm at the fence looking in, watching events unfold, having to be told what it all means, but nonetheless (again) having my own character driven to and fro.

I thought the story was just the biography of Danni O'Hare nee O'Neill nee McGee, and upon redirection, I latched onto Will of Steel as the focus of the story, but that wasn't intended, either. Despite all this redirection and clarification of intent, I refuse to start over because this story isn't about events to which I may have placed more significance than they deserve in retrospect, but that definitely demand a complete understanding of the impact of the very same events on the person of Danni McGee. Often in plot-driven stories the events fully determine what little actual character change occurs

through the story such that the character heroically emerges unscathed by what has transpired in the tale. Danni is not that kind of heroine. She is real and is evolving. I am confident in my tale for that very reason. And there is no need to second guess whether the character would react as stated in a given circumstance, because I have it from the horse's mouth that that is precisely how she did in fact react. But she is more than that, which is what I had hardly fathomed; she is symbolic of a generation of kids growing up on racetracks everywhere that were different back then because the so-called Sport of Kings has changed dramatically in the interval. It's a tragedy really for which sanity demands a correction exemplified by Danni.

After I finally got my head around Danni being the best damned trainer in the world whose ability will never be generally acknowledged by anyone other than me and a handful of devoted friends who witness with joy what she has done to develop the fleetest filly to never race in a recognized race, I sort of relaxed into the sense that it made for her as a trainer and for me in my role of recording her refusal to race the greatest racehorse of all time. That may be a little hyperbolic, but Willow as the physical realization of a real dream and not just a fleeting whimsical what-could-have-been-if-only counterfactual dream, it may make sense. No, this dream is reified as objective facts of a racehorse whose training regimen is precisely matched to her skeletal and musculature developments that would support the extreme stresses of horse racing. She is a horse, allowed to revel in its emerging excellence, that allows an awestruck few of us to witness her performance, avoiding foolish pleasure of avaricious competition for purse monies made possible by addictive gambling interests.

I'm not going to keep going on like this about how and why the story is the way it is, I will get on with what has happened and continues to happen to sharpen this blade of steel we see being hammered out. This account will not be doctored up to promote sales by introducing flair that is inconsistent with the coordination of the medium with the message.

So...

Next morning after my most recent direction correction and nightmare, I purposed to watch Danni more closely in an attempt to more fully understand the nature of her quest. And thus, as usual following dressing and minimal

ablutions, she went out directly to see to Willow. I followed—certainly not surreptitiously, but as being other than my usual, she noticed me, but without comment. She first fondled Willow’s muzzle and face, stroking behind her ears, and ducked under the webbing to check her feed and water buckets, bringing them out to fill. The primary purpose of which was to verify Willow’s ingestive normality, her hay net nearly empty. Next, she knelt and, I think that day there were no wraps to undo, began with a palm on each knee first, then a methodical palming of the cannons, throughout which process I watched her face, thoughtful, calculating. Her palms on the shins, slowly measured temperatures, her fingers and thumb sliding down the tendon in the back to test for any irregularity. Her left hand hesitated a moment about a third of the way down the shin before again proceeding. After feeling the pasterns and palming the hooves, she placed a palm once more on the left cannon where she had hesitated before. Her expression although intense, showed no concern, she rose after ducking under the webbing.

“A problem?” I asked.

“No.” She had proceeded to clean the water bucket and refill it.

“I’ll get it,” I said, taking the filled bucket from her and reaching into the stall to hook it up back on its ring. She was mixing the morning feed; Blue, a stall over, took audible notice with his gentle snort. I filled his water bucket and got his feed to give him when Danni had finished preparing them. He and I are friends but neither of us is very demonstrative.

As we were walking back to the house I relate my observation, “Was there a little more heat in that left shin this morning?”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, “but it’s not a problem, just the bone developing to meet the stress of speed in a massive animal.”

“Do larger horses develop a proportionately larger layer of new bone on the front of the cannon?” I asked.

Danni looked over at me, surprised I think, “Yes, they do, but no one’s ever asked me that before.”

“Maybe no one you’ve encountered who’s involved in horse racing has ever read Galileo,” I smirked. “They probably read Tesio instead if they’re into Arts and Letters.”

“Probably not,” she said, ignoring the red herring with her words but not her expression. “The deformity of giants, right?”

We were in the house working on breakfast when she added, “If I had not retired, I would have analyzed that aspect of structure versus function in more detail. I’m only suspecting that it’s the case, as evidently you are too. I guess it’s a natural aspect to consider.”

“Yeah. It seems like a natural corollary of your theory of structure and function.” After a pause I added, “Do you really consider yourself retired? I hadn’t noticed.”

We had our breakfast prepared by then, and sat down to eat it, both still thinking of the significance of the relationship between function and structure in a horse’s legs as applied to a racing regimen.

“I need my shin towels,” she mused. “I didn’t think I’d ever need them again, but I certainly do.” She mused a bit more in silence as I watched her facial expressions. “We need to get back to the west coast to pick up our stuff and sell the places.”

“We do,” I agreed. “Shin towels?”

“Oh, they’re just something I invented to assess temperatures much more accurately than hands on a horse’s leg.”

“‘More accurately’ how?”

“I designed a two-dimensional array of electrical thermocouples; there are overlapping wire circuits forming a mesh of temperature measurements. Each juncture provides a data point that becomes a part of an image. It accurately depicts where the hairline spiral disc fractures have occurred on the cannon bone and how serious they might be. I designed them with therapeutics as the objective, but now I see them as essential to programming necessary bone development to support the speed of which a thoroughbred is capable.”

Her eyes were squinted with an inward look, her words not spoken to me; they were merely audible sounds of thoughts. “There’s an associated Seebeck effect; it induces heat through a thermocouple, but inefficiently. However, the more effective Peltier modules prove that it can be done. There needs to be more research.”

Then, looking across the table at me, she said. “Then by measuring and inducing the heat, one should eventually be able to engineer the perfect bone structure of the foreleg for the weight and speed of each specific racehorse.”

I sat, spoon in hand, deciphering remembered word sequences in what she had expressed. I liked how she was finally openly sharing the way she thinks about what she does—considering me capable of understanding.

“It’s to manipulate evolution to make it work for us,” she said with an excited tone.

And although the explanation wasn’t as clear to me as it was to her, I was getting the idea, “‘manipulated evolution’?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” She had clearly been off down some related path in her thoughts. “Horses evolved to what they are today. How evolution works is by matching the species to its environment by adaption. Non adapted individuals are removed from the gene pool by non-competitiveness in that environment until finally the match is complete. But changing the environment imposes a much more stringent selection process onto a fully developed species. If the Lamarckian evolution theory were correct—which it isn’t, so don’t get me wrong—then a Secretariat would have had less regression to the mean in his produce. Phenotypical developments can’t modify the genotype. Darwinian evolution takes a long time.”

“Eons,” I said. “And yet breaking racing records is a usual thing.”

“Breaking records is counter evolutionary, yet there are many instances of Rabbit Runs in the Thoroughbred industry. Lucky Mike ran as a two-year-old in California in the seventies, won stakes and set world records almost every time he ran, but that was only four or five times before he broke down. Yet breeders bred their mares to him hoping for a world record. Gunderson’s had a filly by him, but she was always sore. I would have bred a mare to Lucky Mike too if he was straight. There are other reasons why I wouldn’t now.”

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“You’ve pointed out repeatedly the problems with breeding Gold Afloat to Rabbit Run. They would each have been eliminated from the gene pool—in fact they *were* eliminated by natural selection after one mating. But we didn’t want them removed; they shouldn’t have been removed; they were ideals as progenitors of more perfect racehorses, horses like Ruffian. Current selection

processes are at odds with the ‘natural’ selection processes for which survival through the procreation phase of a horse’s life is paramount.”

I furthered my argument; “the thoroughbred industry is at cross purposes with natural selection. It’s selection processes have been perverted such that rather than increased speed increasing survival rates, it depends on help from another species to assure that that speed doesn’t eliminate the individual from the gene pool. Co-evolution is not unusual, but usually it is to accommodate limiting overpopulation of one species with the other adapting to eating the other. You are defending an erroneous selection process.”

“No.” She was emphatic. “Although you’ve identified current breeding selection processes as the problem, as I have argued repeatedly, every viable racehorse breeder and trainer—wants a Gold Run if they can’t have a Ruffian. Once one gets a Gold Run or Ruffian (if one is lucky), then one must take on the responsibility of keeping them from breaking down. A proper response to the Ruffian Syndrome is to modify the environment until the development of the bone structures of the foreleg has completed in the phenotype expression. This development must be nurtured properly. Race horses need trainers.

“The size of human feet and lengths of necks as well as the shape of the skull have all been altered artificially to match culturally desired shapes. We need to do that with the horses’ cannon bone if we expect them to support the cultural expectations expressed by breeder selection criteria aimed at breaking track records. We want faster horses and the only way to keep that trait in the breed is to assist the required phenotypical adaptation to speed otherwise all the fastest horses will be systematically eliminated.”

“So, explain your solution to me one more time or till I get it.”

“Okay, since we adamantly refuse to alter the selection process, and the ‘weeding out’ process is too thorough to be acceptable, the only other option is to address the developmental process of the genotype expression into the structural features of the phenotype. We can alter that just like the Chinook and Salish tribes of the pacific northwest did when they bound their babies’ heads between boards. We alter the structure to meet the functional demand?”

“That would be a good metaphor with which to end the class if this were when the end of period bell rings. You’d get a standing ovation as your class scuttles off to the boring lecture in their next class?”

She smiled. “Shouldn’t you be clapping, if that’s the case?”

“This is the sound of one hand clapping,” I said with a one-hand clapping motion. “But, what if the next day some smartass kid raises his hand and says, ‘Professor O’Neill, I don’t think you intended that as a metaphor. Those were real boards and you’re proposing the breaking of bones to make them stronger. I get the requirement, but how do you propose to do that humanely?’ What’s your answer to that?”

“I never said it was a metaphor. You did. We have artificially changed the environment to which the Thoroughbred was ideally adapted. I didn’t do that, and I wouldn’t have proposed it. It’s a fact. Since we can’t effectively modify the genes responsible for the morphology of the cannon, we need to introduce the young horse into the ultimate environment just as soon, and as gradually as possible. Using adaptive aspects of the developmental phase of expression into the phenotype, we can alter the structure to meet functional demands of the modern racehorse, avoiding injury and removal from the gene pool.

“Neo evolution,” I responded. “So your neo racehorse will no longer be adapted for release with mustangs by the Electric Cowboy but will not need steroids and painkillers to be a racehorse. And you can breed him without hanging him in a hammock. Is that your approach to the Ruffian Syndrome?”

“Pretty much,” she agreed. “But you make it seem much worse than it is.”

“Do you think Sonny Steele would agree?”

“Damned it, Richard O’Hare. You are...” she hesitated, “argumentative.”

“Would you have given me a failing grade in your class?”

“No. I’d have given you an A plus and recommended you get the hell out of vet school and into some useless department like philosophy, because you couldn’t handle the real world of being a vet.”

We laughed and then sat there for a while drinking our coffee. I filled my cup and asked with a nod whether she wanted hers filled but she didn’t.

She broke the agreeable silence with, “I think I can work Willow again day after tomorrow. I’d like to leave for Sea-Tac two days after that, if there’s no problem with Willow after the work. How does that fit into your schedule, Ricky?”

“You mean with my fucked-up schedule priorities? I no longer keep a schedule. I just follow you around and ask my questions, boring as they are. And I answer any, and all, of your questions—if I can. If you ask whether I want to do some particular thing or go somewhere, the answer is always yes. I want to ride shotgun. It’s what I’m best at. So yeah, that’s this coming Monday, right? It fits right into my schedule.”

“Okay then,” she confirmed for me. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter Fourteen: Way Out West

Danni decided that Willow could pasture with Blue during the days we were away. Jameson knew the procedure for checking her legs night and morning and was proud to be asked. Loretta and Jameson have made the vagaries of our activities so much easier to schedule as co-Howard Farm farmers. Loretta would, of course tend to the flowers and Jenni. Jenni and Bugs hang together and eat each other's food with impunity anyway.

Jamesons insisted on taking us to the airport in Cincinnati, so there were no more preparation necessary beyond Willow's work on Sunday morning. Jameson had Loretta attend chapel without him 'jus dis wunce; it iz my job,' he told her, and she understood. When Loretta told Danni, Danni told her there was no need, but Loretta was completely aware of the need that her Jimmy had to 'let deez good people no dey need wury bout nuthin.' And so, we did indeed not worry about anything as we left the farm early Tuesday morning. Loretta joined us for the excursion.

The flight schedule had us with a couple of hours layover in "O'Hare"—Danni insisted whenever I would say "Chicago" that it was O'Hare. That was about as big a dispute as we've had, we both decided as we're sitting in the terminal at O'Hare. Danni was singing her version of the refrain from the old Jimmy Rogers song, 'A thousand miles away from home, just a waitin' for a plane'. She even put a little yodel in at the end and said, "My dad used to sing that to me when we were on the road from one track to another. That hasn't come back to me in, what... at least thirty years." We laughed with the joy at the very idea of going on vacation.

At Sea-Tac it took forever to un-board and rent a vehicle. When we had finally got the car and onto Highway 405, I once again asked her the age-old question, "Your place or mine?" We laughed happily; it was becoming a silly habit.

She broke from the laughter with, "You haven't seen mine and I dare say it's a bit nicer than yours." So we drove on past fond memories of Longacres that included the signature fifty-year-old memory of our standing at the fence. There's nothing left but a few poplars. "That is such a shame," she said, the

only outward evidence of what was on both our minds. Then we drove on through Renton and the 'S' curves to Kenneydale. Her condo was on the third floor of a modern building that was situated a block up a steep hill away from the lake.

"It doesn't even have roman brick," I said as she used the app on her phone to open a parking garage beneath the building. "But classy," I added. She wasn't entering into the frivolity much. I figured there were memories that harbored some sadness.

Up the elevator and through the doorway to a marvelous view of the lake. It wasn't even raining. I don't know what it is, but cross-country flights wear me out. I spied the recliner facing west over Lake Washington and I settled into it. Somehow it felt like home, and I'd never been here before; it was having Danni near that made every place seem like my home I decided. She was busy scurrying around reminding me of just about a year ago finding myself plunked down at Howard farm with her setting me down like a suitcase for her to unpack when she finally got around to it.

She came from another room saying, "The bed's made; shall we use it?"

That was immediately accepted, and then laying there on my back was so relaxing. She started singing 'a thousand miles away from home' again and I just drifted off. When I awoke, she was in the kitchen, and I had this vague feeling of there not possibly being anything in there to eat and the counter sense of the scent of something delicious. Seldom have opposing thoughts been in such stark agreement.

"Smells good," I affirmed with a satisfied yawn as I fastened my trousers and entered the kitchen. "You must have left some nonperishables in your freezer."

"These were in there, and I doubted whether you'd feel like going to a grocery store or to Tobago's today."

"You got that right, I'd say," I did say, eating hardly recognizable tidbits mixed with the pasta that had been bagged up tight for God knows how long. "What was the use-by date on this stuff?" I asked more to be cute than to care or be answered.

"I think it was today," she laughed.

“So,” I opined, “We need groceries and to pick up your car and mine at the old place.”

She did in fact agree by saying, “I would certainly agree with that.” Pretty straight forward stuff, but then she added a question, “Is there anything you notice that’s different about this place than what you imagined?”

I thought for a moment; then I got up from the stool I was on by the island in the kitchen, walked back into her bedroom and finally realized what was missing. “You said your portrait was hanging in here. It isn’t. And where is the rest of J.O.’s work?”

“I had actually forgotten what had happened to them myself,” she answered. “Remember when I was hanging out at your folks place after we had met up at Tobago’s and I went out for groceries?”

“Yeah. And it took you hours such that Jenni and I were convinced we had experienced just another one-night stand? Yes, I remember. I was terrified you’d given up on us after I had thought I found the other half of me.”

“Well,” she clarified, “as I told you, I came over here to clean up some things because I thought you might get tired of the clothes I was wearing or be curious about where I lived and want to see it. I noticed all those paintings Johnny had done and started crying. I couldn’t explain any specific reason for it other than the reality of him in the paintings. I concluded that I had to get rid of them before you came over here and saw them.”

“No!” I exclaimed, “You didn’t! You couldn’t have thrown them away.”

“No, of course not; you know me better than that. They are years of my life. So I just put them all in the closet. I just couldn’t imagine having to explain them to you at that point in our relationship and all the questions I didn’t feel like answering about Johnny.”

“I can see that,” I said. “It took you forever to be willing to relive your Johnny O years in front of me.”

“You can’t imagine what a relief it was for me to get that explanation out of the way. He was such a major part of my life for so long that it felt almost like betrayal to move on. I’ll hang them up so you can see how I lived?”

“I’m anxious for that,” I said.

“I’d like to hang them by myself without you here. Would it be alright if, even though you don’t feel like it, I did that alone while you go down to the Red Apple and get us some milk and cereal for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I agreed, but while getting the rest of my clothes on, I looked around the rooms and saw additional aspects of the place that differed from what I would have expected. “You’ve got no books or anything else in here. Wasn’t I supposed to see those either?”

“No, you weren’t. Just leave and I’ll restore the place to what it was.”

“Okay, I’m going. You will let me back in, won’t you?” And I was gone.

I didn’t know where the Red Apple was, so I headed back into Renton just to drive by the old place and verify Danni’s tan sedan was still parked on the curb with hub caps. It was still there. I wondered whether it would start, but I didn’t have the keys with me or the keys to the house for that matter. The lawn weeds were tall, but no worse than the neighbors. Memories. They were all of the few days with Danni there, not the years of my life associated with that place. I drove on. I drove by Tobagos with memories of the only time I’d ever been in there. Safeway. It makes sense that that was where my mother would have shopped. Dad too if he had ever shopped. Finding the cereal and milk was easy, Cheerios for Danni and Willow, Wheaties for me and Bruce. I got back on 405 and did the short hop to Kennydale which is about as far as Howard farm is from Irvine. I notice that my comparatives and perspectives have all changed in less than a year; I’m from Kentucky now.

I had to park in the street, but then dumb of all dumbs, I realized I just needed to call Danni to have her open the garage, so I got back in the car and did that. Then up at her door, I knocked.

She welcomed me back with a smiling, “Hi!”

“Hi, yourself,” I said and was muted by a kiss.

I handed her the eco-friendly bag and looked around at totally embellished décor. In addition to the images of horses on all the walls, the shelves now had books on them as well and end tables—Richard T. O’Hare novels, all of them.

“That’s not the way it had been. You just put those books there to flatter me, didn’t you?” I scolded.

“No, I didn’t,” she said. That was the first thing I noticed when I came back here that day was that heap of your books. That was where I got the idea that I should alter the décor so you wouldn’t freak out. I thought you’d realize I had been stalking you while still having a fetish for Johnny’s paintings when you saw the place.” She paused, looking at me with that damned smile, “And here you are freaking out all this time later, realizing you were stalked and I had snared you.” I thought her explanation was pretty cute actually.

I walked over to the first Johnny O horse portrait; it was probably two feet by three feet of an Arab-looking gray horse, a head on view of the dished-faced head and a neck with flowing mane. I looked closely at the fine ridges of the brush strokes which barely distinguished it from a very high-resolution photograph. It was perfect. If there was any flaw in the painting it was in its perfection; it must have captured the exact likeness of the individual.

“We had to put Bathsheba down the next day,” Danni said.

Then I saw in the eyes what couldn’t have been captured by a photograph. There was that look of fear—terror—that I had recognized in his painting of Rabbit Run. I think that look that he had mastered must have had more to do with Johnny O than the horses. “When would he have painted this,” I asked.

“It was his final painting. I think there are brush strokes from the night before he died. It was on his easel; the paint on his pallet was still wet when I came home from the hospital.”

“I can see why you wouldn’t have wanted me to see this back then. I’d have had to know about Johnny long before you were willing to tell me.”

“Yeah.”

I stepped over to the next painting, it was a dark stallion that on a pedigree would read ‘dark bay or brown’. It was the classic pose of 19th century equine art, but anatomically much more accurate. “And this?” I asked.

“Power of Balance,” she said. “Wonderfully bred stallion we attempted to save to stand in this State, a broken right hind pastern. Johnny took the photo from which he painted this. It was right before we anesthetized him to attempt a prosthesis that you asked me whether I had ever tried. It didn’t work.” She paused again, clearly saddened. “In the photo his right hind leg is up and in a splint which Johnny didn’t paint.”

“They are beautiful,” I said, “but don’t they tend to be a bit depressing for you?”

“You scoffed at the only non-depressing aspect of the entire room,” she said nodding toward the disheveled pile of Richard O’Hare books.

“Thanks,” I said and meant it more than most any ‘thank you’ I’ve stated in my life. “So what about the original of the famous portrait of you that I’ve been looking forward to seeing?”

“It’s in the bedroom here,” she said as she led me through the doorway.

It was probably three and a half by five feet; it was of her sitting in an overstuffed chair—the one in her living room. She has a book opened on her lap. I had found the digitized version to be exquisite, but this was living breathing Danni McGee—I use the name Danni McGee when I refer to what I consider the real Danni, the genotypical Danni, the one before and beyond the O’s that got artificially added. If I had never seen the girl or woman in the flesh, I would love the woman this painting represented. I couldn’t adequately explain that to Danni or anyone else. It was a feeling—not ‘just a feeling’, it was something deep within me, a part of me.

“You like it, don’t you?” she observed. I was suddenly overwhelmed with additional emotions I can’t explain. Because as I looked across the room that had initially been behind me, I saw the nude painting of her. It was the same size as her portrait but hung sideways. I walked over to it, reaching out a hand toward the image; I was emotionally overwhelmed. How a homosexual man comprehended and painted such a bared and beautiful specimen of the femella homo sapiens—the perhaps misogynistic term that had embedded itself within my brain—was nothing short of amazing to me. That this man who was not ‘into’ women could so perfectly portray the perfect woman that even a former womanizer such as myself would not have been capable of beholding without holding her in my arms, filled me with admiration for Johnny O’Neill. I stood there feeling tiny once again with regard to my very being in the presence of the one of whom my first impression had been that she was ‘tiny’.

I looked over at Danni, standing there proudly if a little self-consciously, and we stepped into each other’s arms and stood there wordless for some time. Eventually she pulled away, but still with my hand in hers and led me back to her living room. She sat me down on the recliner where I had sat in initially,

took the grocery bag to the kitchen, put the milk in the fridge, and then sat in the overstuffed chair that was next to mine.

“Did you drive by your old place?” she asked at last. “You were much longer than going to the Red Apple market. It’s okay though; it took me that long to situate things.”

“I did. I wanted to see whether your car had been burglarized. It hasn’t been. Weeds in the lawn are a little taller and that’s about all that’s changed. I didn’t have my keys to check inside.”

“Do you want to return the rental tonight and use one of our own cars?”

“If we do that, it should be my car. But why do it now? To save a few dollars?”

“Fuck it,” she said with humor, and we were back on our extravagant fun vacation.

“You saw that I got some powdered sugar doughnut holes and coffee.” I rose and continued, “I’ll get some coffee brewing if you tell me where things are. Let’s have some coffee and holes.”

She was up and searching cupboards to find stuff as though this were someone else’s home, but she found everything we needed and soon we were watching dusk fall on Lake Washington and stuffing ourselves with the most inconsequential aspects of doughnuts.

“I wonder how Jameson did with Willow,” Danni asked for no reason.

And I answered “Fine,” with emphasis for good reason.

“You think they’re up? It’s what, ten o’clock there?”

“I think they go to bed early,” I said.

“I’m going to call them anyway. They’ll want to know we made it safely.”

I knew she would call no matter what I said, so I said no more, watching her call.

“Hi, Loretta. Did I wake you?”

“Nah, it’s good to hear your voice, Danni.” The phone was on speaker. “Safe trip?”

“Yes, it was. We should have phoned earlier, but...”

“You wanted to talk to Jimmy to know how Willow was, didn’t you?”
Laughter coming through the phone.

“Yes,” Danni admitted shame-facedly. “Is Jameson there.”

“I is rite here Danni, aint gone nowhere and Willow is juz fine, real fine. No heat, no nothin. Eatin everthing juz like Blue. Jenni missin youse doh; Bugs elpin er.”

“Oh good,” Danni said. “Did Willow like pasturing with Blue?”

“She love it; she do like dat Blue. Ever taing fine der?”

“Yes. Everything’s fine here; you have my number, don’t you Jameson?”

“Betcha. I look tatit dis aftanoon, make sure. You relax Danni; I knows how t’do dis taing. An you ha some fun; you need fun, Danni, not to wurry bout me’n Willow none. We is fine.”

“I know, Jameson,” she said, “I know. I’ll leave you and Loretta alone a while. You just call me if anything comes up.”

“Sur will Danni. Thanks you call. Bye now,” and he was gone.

“Oh my God, Ricky. That was awful.” She laughed, totally embarrassed.

“You ha some fun, Danni. You need fun,” I mimicked, and we continued laughing.

“I wonder if this TV works. I never discontinued it.” She reached in a drawer, found the hodie, and immediately the environment was filled with noise. She finally muted it and began hopping channels and got off on Netflix movies. “Hey, look; they’ve got the ‘The Electric Horseman’; remember teasing me about that the other day? Robert Redford as Sonny Steele, with him releasing a so-called champion thoroughbred out with a mustang heard.” She laughed. “You were suggesting my approach to training would ruin all that fun?”

I just laughed. “Yeah, it would. The Sundance Kid is trying to release a horse into the environment to which it has been adapted by eons of evolution and you’re trying to fuck it all up and disconnect him from his evolutionary origins.”

“I know, I know, but it was a fun movie. Let’s watch it.”

“Fine by me but I might unlearn some of what you’ve taught me if I go watching a counter narrative. I wonder if they don’t have Casey’s Shadow on Netflix instead?”

“Oh God! I loved that movie. Now that is a race tracker’s movie.”

But the breakfast of champions cowboy was already starting, so I squared my chair around and Danni plopped herself down on my lap to watch the movie. It was good. Again. We both enjoyed it, again. When it was over we went to bed to sleep this time.

Chapter Fifteen: Cashing Out

Next morning we began deliberations of what to keep and what to throw away, and increasingly how do we get all this stuff from western Washington to eastern Kentucky? Those were major issues to be sure, but beneath those overall concerns were the perusals of long forgotten riff raff and what should not be taken but was too good to be destroyed. Also secondary, but still very important issues were our two cars and whether one or both of them should do a transcontinental drive. We were still at Danni's flat with a large pile of it's-too-bad-but-it-has-to-be-thrown-away stuff. There was a much smaller, but still appreciable, if more organized, pile of all-this-goes-to-Kentucky stuff. I was sitting in the recliner that I had initially requisitioned, reading a technical paper written by the eminent veterinarian Danielle O'Neill, PhD that is titled, 'Cannon Bone Injuries in Thoroughbred Racehorses'.

At the same time that same Doctor Danni was sitting in an overstuffed chair close to me, manipulating one of those 'shin towels' used in her research. It was connected to a controller that was in turn plugged into the outlet next to her chair. As she was fingering the towel and controller, she was watching her laptop, confused. "This damned thing isn't connecting."

Irritated myself at being distracted, I looked over at her frustration to say, "What we have here is a communication problem," direct from Cool Hand Luke.

"Cute," she replied angrily, "but not helpful."

"Does that work off of WIFI?" I asked in a more helpful frame of mind.

"Oh, yeah," she said, and walked off to check a wall panel.

So I ducked back into my heavy reading. She had included an appendix on the 'shin towel' that I was reading, which references a second appendix that describes the nature of the thermocouples used in the towels. I thumb to it where I am informed that 'a thermocouple is just a mechanism for measuring temperature by connecting two dissimilar metallic wires at a junction in an electric circuit. When the area around that junction changes temperature, there will be a commensurable change that occurs in voltage in the electric circuit that includes the thermocouple. Voltage through the circuit can be measured

directly, and with calibration, this value can be converted into a temperature reading.’ So the elemental principle of her wired up shin towels started to make some sense. I went back to a page I had been reading before being diverted to shin towels and thermocouples appendices. I’ve got to say that with all the wires on separate circuits with multiple thermocouple elements along each wire, sewed into two layers of felt that hide the wires, and having to coordinate the hot spots that occur in a wire headed north with another that is headed east requires someone more like David than Richard O’Hare to fully appreciate the intricacy. I understand it but don’t appreciate it like I should, and I can’t figure out how my beautiful wife who’s hanging on the wall in the nude in the next room ever figured this thing out before such a thing existed.

“Look at this,” Danni says beaming over at me.

Looking in her direction now, I see that she has her laptop tipped for me to witness first-hand a crisscrossed array of wires that I am reading about in her paper. “Wow,” I respond, “I was just reading about that in a seminal paper by a colleague of mine.”

“He must be fucking brilliant,” she says.

“She sure as hell is,” I respond, and we laugh with joy.

“But we’ve got work to do,” she says, “and miles to go before we sleep.’”

“What is it with dead poets,” I ask. “I thought we were having fun.”

“We are,” she bubbled, wrapping her shin towels around the controller and back into the bag she had been so happy to have found earlier. So I place the paper I was reading back on a stack of papers in her ‘Academic Papers’ box, placing the box with the towel bag on the ‘to keep’ pile.

In the bedroom she had clothes to keep neatly on top of each other on the bed, the others in a heap on the floor. The undies and socks to keep were in a garbage bag on the bed.

“How are we going to transport the paintings?” she asked.

I had put considerable thought into that during waking hours last night, so I said, “I really do think I ought to drive my SUV back with all this stuff. We won’t have to worry about packaging and dealing with a shipper, their lengthy schedule and all that crap. I can do it in three days, I think.” I paused. “It’s a good time of year for driving.”

“I’ll come with you then.”

“No need,” I said. “There was a time I could survive three nights in a row without you.”

“Well, I remember when you barely made it through a single night.”

“What a night that was,” I laughed, giving my rendition of a Ricky Nelson song, “Hello Mary Lou; Goodbye heart.”

“Actually I was thinking of the night we flew to Kentucky. But yeah, I’m sure that one was more memorable to you. Didn’t you promise that she would be remembered as a ‘good person’ in a novel by Richard O’Hare sometime?”

“I did, yeah.” I didn’t wish to discuss the exigencies of the situation that had precipitated the so-called ‘promise’ that I considered somewhat less than binding. I certainly didn’t wish to discuss my thoughts after dismissing her.

“Don’t back out on that promise” she said in dismissing that topic.

I looked at her to see whether that had been spoken with some English on it, but she seemed oblivious with a blouse draped over her, looking in the mirror. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll fly back.”

“So, are we ready to clean out the casa of David and Elizabeth O?” I ask.

“Yes. We can just leave this, right?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

“That was kind of fun, wasn’t it.” She said, once we were on 405 heading south to Renton, maybe a minute before she asked, “What about your house in Malibu?”

“Malibu?”

“Wherever you lived before the David O’Hare castle,” she clarified.

“It was Anacortes.”

“You’ve never told me about that. That’s an obvious place for a writer to have retired. Good choice. I’ve heard it’s beautiful. We have to go up there while we’re here in Washington.”

“It is beautiful but there’s nothing there now.”

“Nothing there? How can there be nothing there if that’s where you lived when you came to, as you say, ‘watch your dad die’? You had to be planning on going back.”

“I sold the place.”

“Then you must have a bunch of stuff stored someplace—a storage unit? Where? I know you used to live in Malibu.”

“Danni, Danni! Wake up. This is Richard T. O’Hare here” We were in front of the roman brick castle now. “How much stuff of mine do you think I’d have to pack if I were to be booted from the Howard Farm in Kentucky? Nothing! I travel light.”

“That is so sad,” she asserted. Then, “Sad, really sad.” She had doubled down. “You’re not a traveler. And what about Jenni and Blue... and me?”

I had the key to the castle this time and opened the front door. There was a weird un-lived-in smell to the place. Danni didn’t let on if she noticed it, but it was real. It wasn’t like any place where she would ever have lived, and she had graced this castle too late and too briefly to bring it to life. Once inside we stood looking at a fully furnished room with absolutely no personality, or rather, my dad’s personality. I went immediately into the garage to check on my car. I opened the garage door and started it. No problem.

Danni was in the door between the house and garage watching me then. I rolled the window down. “What?”

“You need to take that to a garage to have them check it over before you leave. Better do it before we fill it up.”

“It’s fine,” I tried to assure her, but I can’t tell whether I have had success at that, but we both know there will be no outside assessment of the health of this vehicle. I leave it running when I go back in the house. “So, what are we doing,” I ask.

“Ricky! This is *your* house. *You* have to decide what you want to take.”

“I have,” I said.

“What?”

“My car.”

“Ricky!” She was exasperated. “What about your underwear and socks?”

“Oh, yeah, Okay. I’ll bag some up.”

“You’ve got nice suits, and, shirts, and ties.”

“Why do I need them? I’m a farmer.”

“We might be invited to some nice occasions some time. You need to bring them.”

“Okay, we’ll bag them too.”

“Ricky. Could we just sit down here on this couch like we did with Jenni last year?”

Okay, I didn't ask why because I knew why and asking why would have been an issue and we didn't need another issue.

After sitting there for a little while, she said, "Remember me telling you when we were last here that you needed to engage?"

I laughed when I shouldn't have—again—and said, "Yep. And since then I became engaged and am now very happily married."

She laughed too, but I could tell she was a little irritated. "I'm the one who told you we were married and when we should go to get it formalized. That's how engaged you were."

"Danni," I pleaded, "I know all that. You wanted me to be emotionally involved in writing about us, and I assure you that whether you notice it or not, I am head over heels in love with you. You are the only person in the world who could have tamed "poor little Jackie boy Ricky." And I am tamed, you can take me off the leash any time anywhere and I ain't going nowhere. I'm yours as surely as Jenni and Willow are, but each one of us is just a little different from the other and we don't pretend to get all that you get or why you like us so much. But I just don't give a shit about this castle or the shorts I wore last year. The realtor I got to sell the Anacortes mansion took care of shipping stuff off to the dump and decorating the place as if somebody had lived there. That's what I want done here."

"Well," she laughed. "I think that's more words than you've hooked together since we left for Kentucky. Maybe you're back. Just remember to include Marylou in your story."

I looked at her totally confused by her criticism and the Marylou twist. I rose and said, "Let's get the hell out of here and turn that rental in; I'll drive my old car."

"What about my car out front?"

"The tan sedan? The realtor will handle it; why don't you drive it into the garage and sign the papers over with the 'new owner' line left blank after we get back to your place. I think I saw those ownership papers just this morning. I think it looks like it belongs to whoever would live here."

"I like that car."

"Okay. So we'll caravan to Kentucky if the sedan can make it and start a used car lot when we get there?"

“Ricky. Let’s get you out of here. I’ll drive my favorite all-time car into the garage where you can sell it.”

I called around later and found a realtor who would do the dirty work of an as-is sale. So we dismissively disposed of the O’Hare roman brick castle. And Danni got ahold of a more upscale realtor to handle the sale of her condo. It is clearly well-situated in a well-kept building where professional people would like to live.

We have to evacuate the buildings so our realtors can do whatever it is they do to get more than a place is worth and skim the cream off the top. We have a car that we can begin filling with the fifty years of Danni’s meaningful life so the realtor can witness cleanliness in Danni’s condo which has not been lived in since she had it completely redone.

It’s been a very big day, but it’s only Wednesday. We have completely overestimated how long it would take to pull up our anchors. They are up.

“We could have gone home tonight,” Danni exclaims.

“Well, we have to get my underwear and drop the keys off at the realtor for the roman brick castle. Your realtor isn’t coming here till late afternoon tomorrow. So, we’re stuck for at least a day or two.”

“You’re taking your dress clothes or you’re coming back for them.”

“I’m going to be cremated and you don’t need dress clothes for that.”

“Ricky! You’re bringing those clothes.”

“You know any of the trainers at Emerald Downs?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Maybe. You want to go there in the morning; the track will be open for training.”

“Yeah. Why not?” is my insignificant contribution.

Morning came. We were up early and now driving down into Renton before breakfast.

“Do you know what happened to Longacres,” Danni asked as we turned off onto the Valley Freeway—Highway 167, heading south from Renton.

“Sold the whole caboodle to Boeing, didn’t they?”

“Yeah,” she said, “but a bunch of wealthy horsemen would have paid as much to keep it running. At least that is what I was told, and they weren’t given the option. But I really don’t know. It’s a shame though.”

“I thought initially Boeing was going to make it their headquarters,” I added my two cent’s worth, “but then they bailed out McDonald-Douglas, whose management then proceeded to take over the entire Boeing Company, the rescuing company. I think they’re headquartered in Chicago now. They just happen to still put a few airplanes together up here. Weird world.”

Danni didn’t care a hoot about Boeing and all their problems. She’s still lamenting Longacres. “It was hard on the horsemen in the northwest when Longacres shut down. This was the only track with quality racing where the northwest horsemen could make a living for thousands of miles around—from Minnesota in the east and down to central California in the south. Nothing. Racing families like the Leonard’s, Baze’s, Gibson’s, Stevens, Walsh’s, Penny’s, Steiner’s, Roberts, Wright’s, McMeans, and how many more, who had produced nationally ranked jockeys and trainers; they all began here.

Trainers like Jane Douglas had to move their stables to other regions, breeders were hurt, and fans—the people who just liked watching magnificent horses run in the flesh, not betting horses running at major tracks with the big markets far away from the local scene, races they watch on a TV screen, but don’t go to the track every time their favorite horse runs, or a local trainer or jockey is vying for the lead in the local track standings. Off track betting and Simulcast has killed any semblance of what local racetracks used to offer. It may not have been the classics, but it was the bread and butter of racing.”

That was quite a tirade. Going under the viaduct at southwest 43rd Street, I looked over at Danni after her rant. She was looking up at the viaduct as we went under as if afraid it would fall on us and continued, “I hate this viaduct. It seems like I’ve driven up it a million times to see Johnny at Valley General. That’s where he died you know.”

We were silent then as we drove on through Kent past James and Meeker. Then we could see the Emerald Downs facilities off on the left and got off on 15th Street, then left on Ron Crocket Drive in the wetlands on the outskirts of Auburn.

“I wonder if Jane is up here yet or if she even comes up here anymore.”

We drove past empty parking lots to the north end of the facility to the track kitchen that was open to the public. We parked and walked in down a long hall past racing offices with win pictures of the local equine stars along the walls. Entering the restaurant itself there were long tables with a few horsemen sitting and talking as they ate. We meandered up to the counter where we encountered Sally Steiner. I knew she wouldn't remember me, but I thought she might remember Danni. She didn't, but Danni asked about Joey, to which Sally brightened. This restaurant was a continuation of a Longacres kitchen run by the Steiners. We ordered a light breakfast and went to sit at an open table with a view of where the horses entered the track.

"They gain access to the track at the quarter pole in front of the stands," it didn't seem like a question, but that had been my intent; I was incredulous. I looked across the table, but Danni had gone off across the room to talk to someone she had known. She was bringing them back with her.

"Jane Douglas," she said. "This is my husband, Richard O'Hare."

"Why you lucky bitch!" Jane exclaimed laughing hilariously. "I sort of introduced you to him, didn't I?" She threw her arms around me insincerely for the fun of it; I guess I'll have to add her to my good person list. "When are you ever going to come out with another of those great novels?"

Never was the answer I had no opportunity to give.

The man who had come over with her seemed to be about Danni and my age. He exclaimed, "Ricky! I remember you from high school—you and Riley—jocks. You also groomed here in what seventy-four?"

"Seventy-five actually," I corrected. "Riley was a jock, not me. I'm sorry, I'm bad with names, you are?"

"No you're not! You're a writer! You just never saw me without that mop I used to wear on top of my head."

"Bubba! Yeah, of course." There was no mop or other covering on his shiny dome. "So what ever happened with Riley?" I asked, looking over at Danni, but she had left. "Is he around?"

"He and his pop died several years ago now. Covid. Wouldn't take their shots—thought the shots would kill 'em." Bubba did a wiggle of the eyes that brought back memories. "You remember Todd, don't you?"

"Plummer? Sure. Is he here?"

“No. I don’t think he’s coming up this year. He’s an assistant to some big stable in Texas.”

Danni had walked off with Jane—probably the mention of Riley. I was hoping she had heard that he was dead. I figured she would like that.

Our breakfasts were delivered, so I sat back down. Bubba sat close by, and Jane came back with Danni who sat back down across, Jane still standing nearby. I poked at my egg; it jiggled in a way I would have rather it hadn’t. I scrambled it in with the hashbrowns.

Bubba addressed Danni directly, “I thought it would have been Riley you ended up with Danni; how’d you do this switcheroo? Oh,” he paused, “you married a jockey didn’t you.”

“I did,” she responded. “I married Johnny. And for your, or anyone else’s information, I’m not at all sorry Riley is dead.”

“Whoa!” Bubba responded with his little chuckle. Jane’s eyebrows lifted.

Jane asked Danni about the research she had been conducting on racing injuries and then, “There’s been a rumor floating about, which is that you are developing the next Ruffian,” her laughter made it evident that the rumor had not been substantiated or considered credible.

I was shocked when Danni said, “She may be.”

Most of the trainers that came over were descendants of people Danni had known or knew her from her veterinary expertise at Pegasus or WSU. I thought I saw Joe Baze over across the room; a very much older version than I remember, but he wouldn’t remember me anyway. Jack Winlock wasn’t there I would have recognized his mummy, and I don’t mean his mother. A couple of younger people who came to our table had heard about Will of Steel and that it was a direct consequence of Danni’s training regimen.

I had finished as much of the breakfast as I could handle. I noticed that Danni hadn’t done much better on hers and she was already drifting off with Jane on out through the horseman’s access to the barn area. Bubba asked if I wanted to see the barn area and his horses. I did.

There weren’t separate barns for each trainer, like the fourteen and thirty horse barns that I had been used to at Longacres. It was just several huge buildings with rows of stalls and walkers between. “What’s the capacity of this facility?” I asked.

“A hundred sixteen stalls,” Bubba replied, “but they don’t all get filled. It’s not like it used to be.”

Math isn’t my thing anymore, but I did some arithmetic in my head. “I remember back in the day there’d be sixteen or twenty horses entered in a single race at Longacres,” I said. “They’d start twelve with four extras written on the card in case of race-day scratches. Don’t I remember that right?”

“Yep,” Bubba confirmed. “Racing ain’t what it used to be.”

“I guess!” I responded. “With this barn capacity you could only race one slate of ten races every week or two.” I was incredulous, “how do they do it?”

“They only run a couple days a week and it’s not as long a meet as it used to be at Longacres.”

“Do the races fill?”

“No. I’m lucky if races I enter get four other horses entered to let it run. Most races are five, six, occasionally eight horses. But cheap horses run for big purses; there is that.”

Danni and Jane were walking back from other areas in the barn heading out in the direction the horses with riders were headed. Bubba and I followed on behind. “You have all your horses out already?” I asked him.

“Yeah, I’ve only got a couple. Doesn’t take long.”

Trainers in golf carts were part of the flow toward the access near the restaurant. Once we got around past the restaurant, we were near where the quarter pole would have been situated at Longacres. “How do you time your horses works watching them cross the wire from behind?”

“It ain’t easy,” Bubba laughed. “You have to walk a quarter mile along the base of the stands here,” which we were doing following Danni and Jane.

We walked all that way to where the trainers were timing their horses’ works. I was looking around at the stands. “Do they fill these on racing days?”

“Nowhere near.”

The women had joined us now. Danni said, “We better get back. That realtor is coming this afternoon, and we have to get our crap in the car.”

We were silent until we were back on 167 heading north, then Danni lamented anew, “That breaks my heart.”

“I imagined it would. I never was a part of it, but it’s awful.” Then more silence ensued.

I thought Danni might make some comment when we went under the viaduct at 43rd, but she remained quiet till we were on 405 nearly back to her condo. “I need to get back to my old Kentucky home,” she said.

“Me too; I’m in full agreement.” We were in the garage; she had undone her seat belt. I said, “You know, maybe we should go get the tan sedan to drive around in till we leave so this SUV with all our past lives in it can stay locked in here.”

“Good idea,” she seconded. “I do like that little car. We’ve been friends a long time.”

“Well, let’s give her a spin then,” so we headed back into Renton to the roman brick castle. Danni backed her favorite car out of the garage, and I picked up the bagged clothes that Danni had insisted I haul to Kentucky. I locked the house up again. She had waited, so I followed her back to the condo, parking the SUV in the locked garage. But Danni had driven off after we got to her place, I didn’t know where and hoped it wasn’t to have maintenance done on that tan sedan she was so in love with.

I had hauled down the bags of stuff for the dump and drove it off to the closest garbage exchange station I found and came back to load the stuff for Kentucky. I had a load of clothes from the bedroom when I saw her park on the curb. I watched as she pulled some large, folded cardboard boxes out of the trunk. I realized then that she must have thought the paintings needed some protection even if they were to be tucked in behind the driver’s seat in the SUV.

“It took a while to find what was needed, huh?”

“Yes. I looked everywhere. I wanted shallow boxes the right size but I couldn’t find any so I thought we could improvise with bed sheets and these cardboard slabs.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. Then she put the cardboard in the closet to wait for packing the paintings till right before I would take off for Kentucky.

“They’ll help the realtor get the idea of how to decorate the place.” Then she said, “I told Jane we’d see her at the races tomorrow. She has a horse running.”

I was not in the least enthused, but it seemed like what should be done.

“Have you tried moving up your flight back home yet?” I asked. “I’d like to take off bright and early the day after tomorrow if that’s alright. To get there as close to when you arrive as possible. If you can’t move your flight up, or you’d rather not, I could maybe meet you when you arrive at the airport.”

“I think they’ll let me move it up,” she replied. “If not, I may just pay to get out of here earlier.”

The chime at the condo front door chimed. “She must be here,” Danni said. And gave her access.

“Her, huh?”

So I sat as part of the décor in the recliner looking out over the lake. She evidently saw the heap of books on the end table. “You must be an O’Hare fan?” she asked.

Please Danni, ‘don’t tell her I’m here’ goes through my mind.

“I used to be,” Danny answers cool as can be. “But I think he must have got too old; he doesn’t write any more, does he?”

“You think that’s the reason? I thought his last one was his best.”

“Really, ‘The Day Jack Died?’” Danni doubted, “I heard he didn’t even like it himself.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” the realtor-ette bemoaned. “Is that why he hasn’t written any more, do you suppose?”

“Anyway,” Danni was weary with the volley and put the squelch on that conversation with, “Shouldn’t we discuss the sales approach here?” and Danni led the way into the kitchen to talk shop.

After the realtor had left with Danni completely satisfied with her choice of real estate broker, I said, “Danni I find both your introductions, as well as your method of blissfully avoiding the requirement to introduce me, equally disturbing.”

She just busted out laughing and followed that with, “Will take me to Tobago’s. I’m starving after having been a bad girl and not eaten what was set before me this morning.”

Once more the only appropriate response was, “Me too.”

We got the SUV loaded with the paintings secured behind the seat and left it locked in the garage, Danni driving her tan sedan to the track. She ranted again driving under the 43rd Street viaduct, but not as long. After getting into the stands at Emerald Downs we got our programs and eventually found ourselves on the fifth floor of a casino. The horses weren't even in the paddock for the first race yet, but betters were screaming for their picks at Saratoga or somewhere as if they were watching it live in front of them. It was showing on the TV screens playing around the room, with sounds of the race being called.

Danni looked at her program and exclaimed, "The stake race today is the second! The second!"

Someone that was walking by behind us said, "That's so people on the east coast can bet on it before they go home."

"Oh," Danni said.

"Why the fuck would they run a stake race with four horses?" I ask.

The helpful passer-by said, "Oh, well, one of the horses scratched this morning."

Our helper has gone, conceivably to cash in his winning ticket on some number at Saratoga.

"So somebody entered a lame horse in the stake to make sure the race got carded, and depended on the track vet to scratch it before post time, but maybe it was so crippled the trainer didn't want to have to depend on a blind track vet and scratched it himself."

"Ricky, this is crazy."

I looked over the program aghast. There were five and six horse fields. "Danni, didn't races used to have twelve entries with four also-eligibles at Longacres back then?" I asked her. "I remember in particular On The Road ran in a \$20,000 filly race for non-winners of three races with a purse of less than \$7,000. Their smallest purse here is \$8,500. Look at these races: Here's a race where the winner's share of a purse is larger than the purchase price of horses in the race. Suppose a horse's value is ten thousand dollars, but he is entered for and wins the five-thousand-dollar claiming race. Then the owner (Tom Blackwater for example) receives more than the ten-thousand-dollar value of the horse for putting him up for sale for half of what he's worth." I

can't keep from thinking of Danni's mother and Molly. Millie must have been doing this kind of deranged math. "Inflation increased purses but devalued the horses. Claiming races were always a bit like poker, but this is crazy. Horses have become a mere commodity, chips in a poker game, nothing more."

"I know is all I can say, Ricky. Jane has a horse in the third race. Let's leave after that."

"Yeah, lets."

Danni bet on the stake race and won fifty bucks for the twenty she bet. It was a close race down to the wire; I think three of the four horses were in the photo. The horses were coming over for the third and Danni wanted to go down to the paddock to see Jane's horse and watch the horses being saddled, the tape-recorded bugle, and the post parade. Jane joined us standing around at ground level.

"Your horse looks like the class of this race," Danni said.

"I think so too," was Jane's response. Then she whispered in Danni's ear, but loud enough that I could hear, "A couple of my friends entered horses so the race would go." She grinned. "We do that for each other." She and Danni laughed. We all went and put money on Jane's horse and Danni told Jane we were leaving after her race; "We have a lot left to do."

We watched the race. Jane's horse won easily. We collected our money which wasn't a lot more than we bet since the horse went out at odds on.

We went to our soon-to-be disowned homes away from home to finish out the day. Danni immediately got busy preparing lunches and snacks for my cross-country odyssey.

Chapter Sixteen: Heading for Home

I didn't feel like leaving Danni, but it is the way to get back to where Danni will be when I get there. According to 'Maps' it's 2,500 miles on the fastest route and should take 34 to 36 hours. I divide that by 325 miles a tank and I get 8 to 10 fill ups. That fastest route takes me on a nearly straight line heading south-east 840 miles through Yakima, Washington; Pendleton, Oregon; Twin Falls, Idaho; to somewhere near Salt Lake City, Utah. Then approximately 840 miles due east through Cheyenne, Wyoming to Lincoln, Nebraska. Then south-east to Kansas City, east to St. Louis, then altogether 890 miles east by south-east to Louisville and Lexington, then south through Richmond and finally east to Irvine. Home!

Looking at my laptop, I'm overwhelmed at the magnitude of this trip. I had had no idea. "My God!"

Somewhere off behind me wrapping or making sandwiches, Danny can apparently hear my thoughts. "What is it?" she asks.

"Did you know that 'Maps' thinks it's faster to go home from Keeneland through Richmond than down 89?" I minimize the impact of my exclamation.

"No, it isn't," she counters. "I've measured it both ways and it's a couple of miles closer going down 89. And it's just a lot nicer drive down 89."

I don't respond soon enough, I guess because she is now hanging over my right shoulder with her finger on my touch pad. "It's twenty-five-hundred fucking miles?" she exclaims. "May I just repeat after you with just a little more emotion," she says, "'Oh my fucking God!' You're not doing that alone Ricky! I'm coming with you."

"No. There's no need," I say. "I've got this."

"No, you effing don't. I'm coming."

"No, you effing aren't," I counter, but I know I'm losing this argument. Maybe it's why I had made my 'My God' thought audible. But I hope not.

"You're seventy years old and you're not doing that on your own."

"I'm not seventy!"

"When were you born, Ricky? You do the math." She had somehow come over the top of my right shoulder, flipped her legs off to my left over the

laptop and was sitting square in the middle of me with my laptop now opened on her lap.

“What the hell Danni. It’s not like you’re the twenty-year-old trophy I just picked up at Smart Cart.”

We both started this hilarious laughter that would abate a bit and then bubble over again.

“Smart Cart”? What the hell is that? Is that where you’ve rented all your trophy wives?” More stupid laughing. “I’m canceling that flight right now. I am, by God, going with you.”

“No. I’m not seventy; you do the math,” was the strongest resistance I could mount other than: “Has anyone ever told you that yours is an extremely foul mouth?”

Ignoring the comment she continues her domination, “Do you know how exhausted you get on a transcontinental flight? You have no idea what an ordeal that drive is. I’ve done it.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t have gas money,” I quipped, and we both started laughing again.

Still laughing she said, “I had better than your fucking gas money and you don’t.”

“That’s mean; that’s what that is,” I counter.

So, there it is, Danni’s coming with me.

“At a little over fifty miles per hour, we can be home in two days!” She jumped off my lap, handing me my laptop. “I’m going to fill the thermoses with coffee and make more sandwiches than I was making for just you.”

I’m left wondering: Is this a trophy wife? How much younger than me is she anyway? I do the math: Two years – three at the most. I ought to know more exactly. So I figure it out and it doesn’t account for her energy.

“Ricky, why don’t you go down and straighten those paintings to just be behind the driver’s seat so the passenger seat can rear back to allow one of us to sleep while the other is driving. Then we can take my car over to the castle and be on our way. I have those papers signed that we were going to leave in the car.”

I rise without comment to do as told, not resentfully; it's what should be done, and as I'm setting the laptop down and balancing myself, she jumps me like she does and kisses me, giggling like a kid.

I straighten the larger paintings to a vertical orientation behind my seat... well, the driver's seat. And then I get in the passenger's side to see how far back our load will let it go. I need to adjust a couple boxes, pushing them further back. And here she is down in the garage with me.

"Let's go," she over emotes, still pulling her raincoat on. She has an umbrella and is running out the garage door to the tan sedan on the curb.

I follow her in the SUV on down through town into Renton and over to the 'castle'. I'm sick of that name for the less than modest abode where I grew up. I unlock the door enter the smelly void, open the door to the garage, and push the button that David O'Hare had been so proud to have installed. It was the Ai of his generation. The tan sedan is now on location. I push the button again. The grinding noise of the garage door starts again and stops. I go back though the house for one last look I didn't need. Mom is sitting over there in the corner in my memory. She looks sad.

"You okay, Ricky?" I forgot Danni was beside me.

"Yeah, let's get out of here."

"Wait!" she says. "A coffee drinker like you must have a thermos around here somewhere, don't you?"

I walk over to a cupboard by the sink whose drips Danni had stopped so long ago now. "There're two here." She took them and shut the cupboard.

Walking through the 'living' room then, Danni touched my shoulder. "I have so many good memories of my time here," she says, and I realize that I do too. They topped this place off and turned it into a castle for a few days. It probably had been on other occasions, but I had never looked at it that way.

Back at the condo after gassing up Danni is doing takeout. She's filled her two thermoses and has started another pot. She's finishing off the second loaf of bread as sandwiches. She's got some open for filling or spreading so I go to work on some of them. She had cleaned out the fridge heating some leftovers. Throwing everything else in the fridge into a bag we'll take out to

the garbage when we leave. She is a well-oiled machine; that will get me home safely. I marvel at this woman with whom I get to spend my waning years.

With arms full of bagged thermoses, sandwiches, and garbage we exit Danni and Johnny's condo. It was a wonderful place.

8:00 PM Thursday

The windshield wipers were flapping time immediately on exiting the garage to Danni singing twenty-five-hundred miles away from home, just a singin' in the rain. But it wasn't too long for the exhilaration of leaving to become the boring reality of the open road made tolerable only by the company one keeps. At virtually every mile I realize that whether she's chattering away or sleeping peacefully she makes my life worth living and I ponder what life could have been if that dumb-ass kid up at the fence had realized a portion of the marvel that bounced beside him. I was remembering again why the cheetah was never domesticated; it's because it has to run the equivalent of seventy miles as foreplay before it's ready to mate. The mind dredges up some strange shit when you're alone or the person next to you is sleeping. She had fallen to sleep by the time we hit the summit on I-90. I had thought I'd be doing I-90 all the way to where I'd turn south from Ohio into Kentucky but looking it up on Maps had shocked me into the realization that that would have been all wrong, but it's still hard for me to believe. Now I'm wondering what her mind will dredge up when I'm sleeping.

Night had fallen and we were in the outskirts leaving Yakima when Danni woke up. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Leaving Yakima ma'am, heading to Pendleton, Salt Lake City, and all points east."

"We trailed a horse over here once, preparing for the Seafair Queen Stakes the next week at Longacres. We won over here for pennies, but not the Seafair. Where is the track?"

"I don't know. For one thing, there is no Yakima track. It was merely a branch on the Longacres tree. That tree fell, branches and all."

"Don't get me started again."

"So, how'd you sleep?"

“Excellently,” was her response. “Want a snack?”

“Sure. What’s on the menu?”

We each had half a sandwich and some coffee as we proceeded southeast, crossing the Columbia river and joining Highway 84 on down to Pendleton and beyond. We were lucky to find a station before Baker City. We gassed up, used the toilets and were on the way again, not appreciably altering our average miles per hour.

1:00 AM Friday

It’s now the wee hours of Friday morning. Danni had taken the wheel, continuing on down as far as Twin Falls. She sang some old favorites from our generation and our parent’s and finally just settled in to driving with me pouring coffee down her occasionally. I napped a little and awoke to the sun climbing the distant mountains. We’re needing to fill up the tank and empty our bladders when we get to Twin Falls.

6:00 AM Friday

So I Took over the driving then, headed toward Salt Lake City. We each had an orange that Danni peeled, alternating kisses on the two oranges and then coffee. I was feeling talkative I guess, so I asked her about her analogy of a horse’s legs being like the oars on a boat. Analogies seemed to be her stock in trade; I had been struck at how apt the comparison when I had read her paper.

“What all is involved, in the mechanisms of the legs as levers in the comparison? Does the foot relate to the broader paddle that anchors the force?” I was just trying to keep awake.

“When the paddle is placed in the water out in the direction of the motion of the boat it’s like a front hoof landing in the forward direction of the motion. The hoof anchors the motion more completely than the paddle on the oar, but with some similarity to the pastern providing the give that the water does on the paddle. The hoof has a bigger cross section than the cannon bone, which has less than a one-inch radius; the pressure on that bone is over three hundred pounds per square inch for a one-thousand-pound horse, so compare that with how much force a man can apply to an oar.”

“You’re putting me to sleep, Danni.”

“I know,” she laughed. “I used to do that to my students.”

“Well, I beg to differ on that, but I’m a little tired to pretend to be an A student. Do you have a peanut butter and jam sandwich there for me and a little coffee to wash it down.”

So it went, mile after mile to Ogden, skirting around north of Salt Lake City onto I-80 heading east, I eventually made it to Rock Springs, Wyoming where the SUV was running on fumes and our bladders were registered as full. Danni bought some unhealthy finger food that was delicious and then she took over at the wheel.

11:00 AM Friday

She was maybe on a sugar high when she started rattling on about her trip hitchhiking home in the spring of ’76. “Did I ever tell you about my trip...”

I stopped her. “No, you didn’t. Have you forgotten why?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten, but trips like this are like vacations in Nevada. The things that are usually off limits aren’t off limits anymore. I know you haven’t fulfilled your obligation to deserve to hear this story, but before we get to Howard Farm you will have bared your soul and we’ll be even!”

“No, we effing won’t.”

“After fifty years, who even knows whether we remember it right.”

“You remember.”

“What was it like, sleeping with a woman you hadn’t even known the day before?” She was laughing her fool head off.

“The last time I did it, it worked out perfectly.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you.”

“Are you kidding; we had a fifty-year relationship; that wasn’t a one-night stand.”

“Danni, you’re just high. Did you get something besides those powdered sugar doughnuts in there?”

“Ricky, we were young. You don’t have to put this in your fucking book, but we should at least be able to state in words what we made our bodies do, right?”

“I think it was more like what our bodies made us do.”

“Well, yeah. Same thing. You had fun though, didn’t you, Ricky? Or you wouldn’t have done it.”

“Okay, Danni, yes, I did have some fun, but it’s not something I look back on with relish. It may have had some value as research for my writing career, I suppose.”

“Does everything have to have a dollar value? I don’t think you live that way now and I didn’t think you did when you were eighteen.”

“Fifty years. Remember? ‘The difference a day makes’ and all that bullshit? Over eighteen thousand of them. They make a difference. We change. We’re the embodiment of character-driven novels. If we hadn’t changed in fifty years, we’d still be the idiots we were. We aren’t.”

“I know that, and I remember our earlier discussion of Willow being a character-driven novel, but even though we disdain plot-driven stories, there has to be a plot—a series of events—that change our character into who we are—that define us. That beautiful woman Jennifer is how you got Jenni. I would like to meet Jennifer some time and thank her for how she prepared you for me. Well... not for that two-fer incident reported in the media.”

I was stunned. “You’ve never told me you knew about that.”

“*Everyone* knows about that, and nobody cares.”

“Danni, that is all crap! I do not want to meet the redneck who picked you up just so he could rape you. I would not congratulate him for ‘preparing’ you for me! So there – is that enough emotion?”

“I didn’t tell you he raped me... did I?”

“You didn’t have to highlight it in bold faced type. It’s part of who you became and why; it initiated your, quote, ‘wild phase’. What’s not to get? But the value of that is all in who you became, not the horrendous event. I should have taught ethics at WSU, don’t you think?”

“I’m just glad you know without me having even told you; it’s part of who I always thought you were but was disappointed to find out you weren’t.”

“Yeah. We’ve been down some winding roads and here we are heading straight for home.”

“I love you, Ricky,” she said. “I am not disappointed in you.” And we drove on through many miles of empty country in silence until eventually we came to Potter, Nebraska where again we had to refuel etc.

4:00 PM Friday

So I’m at the wheel now heading due east toward Lincoln. “I need a cheese sandwich since I know we don’t have Mack N Jack.”

Danni unwrapped my sandwich; it disappeared and on we drove through what I would call desolation. “So don’t you wish you had stuck to plan A and flown home?” I ask, just wanting her to say something, anything to keep me awake.

“And miss the primetime ethics lecture on the morality expectations of a socially un-adapted Boomer? No way, Ho Zay. I wouldn’t have missed that for nuthin’—nuthin’!”

“Are we Boomers?”

“Yep. ‘Fifty-five (although somewhere I saw forty-six) to sixty-four, that’s us either way, now sixty to sixty-nine by the narrower definition. I just looked it up the other day.”

“So what do they say about Boomers?”

“As I understand it, they take pride in their work and are typically very competitive.”

“You said ‘un-adapted’. What did you mean?”

“Ricky, I know you just want me to talk to keep you awake, but I have to take over at nine-ish, drive until two-ish, and I’m sleepy already. I need a little shut eye before my shift because I take pride in my driving assignment. Do you think you can keep it between the lines till we report to honest Abe?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m fine.”

“Would some western music help keep you awake?”

So I listened to Willy and Waylin, and the boys, Emmylou Harris, Jerry Lee Lewis, Myrle Haggard, and Lacey J. Dalton for hours, I guess. Busted flat in Baton Rouge. Danni slept through it all. I kept the SUV between the lines, but my mind wandered between Emmylou and Marylou, two names and individuals who ought not trigger each other, but in a tired mind, they do. I have refused to discuss the perfect specimens of femella homo sapiens that

have graced my bed with Danni, of which I do consider her the prime example if maybe more in the painting in her prime made by the homosexual love of her life—other than me, of course. I don't have any secondary love of one's life among the myriad visitations to my chambers. So why does Marylou somehow seem more right for that role than all the others who have vied for it? I think that may be what is awkward to discuss with Danni because it's awkward for me to think about. She is the first to have been officially off limits for me in sort of the don't touch detachment that Johnny may have felt for the beauty he beheld. Jerry Lee Lewis was 'thirty-nine and holding', holding everything in sight, in the song, although unfortunately now long dead. Am I sixty-nine and holding, slipping past it without slowing down as Danni had accosted me of being seventy and incapable of doing this trip on my own. I could, couldn't I? I don't know, I'm sure as hell tired. It's dark. I've dozed. 'Hello Marylou; Goodbye heart.' I shake my head to stay awake; breathe in and out. An enraged Jennifer. Think about Danni. "Whoops!" I say out loud having caught myself sleeping by rough going on the shoulder. I go ahead and just pull over and bring this rig to a stop before it rolls off the shoulder in the soft going. Danni wakes.

"What is it?" she asks, obviously scared. "Do we have car trouble?"

"No," I say.

"Ricky, did you fall to sleep?"

"Yeah."

"We have to change places. Where are we?" She was out of her door and had come around to my side and was speaking to me through my opened door.

"I don't think Lincoln is too far," I tell her. "I saw a sign a while back that said Grand Island like we were in the Pacific ocean or something."

"Oh," she said. "Fonner Park. Get out." She insists.

"No, Grand Island," I repeated as I unfasten my seat belt.

"Fonner park is a racetrack in Grand Island," she simplifies it for me. "I was here with Mom and Dad one time. It was part of their circuit. I got hurt here; I think. They had to take me to the hospital."

"What did you hurt?"

“Broke my arm I think.” She reached over to rub her right wrist as she pushed my door wider for me to get out. “Well you get over there and get some sleep this time. You need some fucking sleep.”

9:00 PM Friday

So I slept. I woke up in a gas station with Danni evidently in the toilet. I think I was asleep when she returned and for many hours thereafter. We were past Kansas City and heading for Columbia where according to our gas gage, I should take over. I think I’ll be able to do this.

Danni noticed that I was no longer comatose and asked me if I’m alright. I said, “Yeah, I don’t think you should take me to ER just yet. I don’t even have a broken arm.”

She gives me a second, better, check and says, “You ready to take over at Columbia.”

The devil and David O’Hare took over my body at that moment and I responded, “Roger. Space mission Columbia terminating after 300 days in space; we’re down within 40 miles of earth. Over.” And then I came out with a loud ‘Kaboom! That scared the hell out of her.

“God damn it, Ricky! That’s not funny.”

“I never said it was, but words are starting to correlate in ways they may not ever have done before. A while back I got confused between Emmylou and Marylou. Jennifer and whatever.”

“I can keep driving,” she said.

“No!” I insisted now. “I have just had a marvelous sleep, and I am ready to take pride in my work once again as a ka-boomer should.”

She just rolled her eyes as we rolled up to the gas pump. I got out fresh as a daisy to shove the hose into the hole and do the credit cardy thingy, but I am told to do it in the reverse order. Whatever. Then, having successfully completed that transaction with Danni’s assistance, I visit the T, and we’re on the road again.

2:00 AM Saturday

“Columbia is my baby!” I insisted as I got into the driver’s side after my toiletries. “From here we’re heading straight through St. Louis like it was

standing still and on to all points east toward Louisville—are you ready for this Miz McGee?”

“Barely,” Danni says and then she tells me: “We’re on the home stretch, Ricky, heading for Louisville, Keeneland, Lexington, and Howard Farm.”

I set off in song with Hank Snow: “I been everywhere, man, across the desserts bare, man, of travel I’ve done my share, man; I been everywhere,” my voice dropping octaves to match Hank toward the end of the refrain.

“I loved that old guitar picker,” Danni says. And then, “How old was your dad when he died, Ricky?”

I don’t follow the old guitar picker logic, but answer, “Well, the obituary said he was born in 1930. However, it also said he ‘died peacefully in his sleep’ so the obit is not the epitome of truth.”

Ignoring my non sequitur, she calculates, “Ninety-two or -three then?”

“Yeah, I guess he was.”

“Your mom?”

“My mom, what?”

“How old was your mom when she died?” she almost screams it.

I tried to remember where I was and what I was doing when my mother died. Oh... it comes back in units of novel publications and separations from women along with the minimal self-awareness that those are not proper units for measuring time. Elain. New Years 2012. So my delayed response is: “About eighty-two.”

“So do you think you’ll make it into your eighties or nineties, Ricky?”

“I don’t know, how about you?”

“I think you may have trouble making ninety I would say.” She laughed at least, and then, “Well, my dad was in his twenties and my mom never saw forty, so I’m doomed.”

Sensing the impossibility of using Danni’s method of predicting life expectancy, and my insensitivity in trying, I ask, “How about Daniel and Maybelle and Mac and Liz McGee nee McDonald?”

“Not good,” she said. “Seventy-ish, all of them.”

“Well you have something to prove then, don’t you?”

“I do, yes, I do.”

Shortly she was asleep.

I can only make it as far as Ferdinand, Indiana, at which point my mind is off on Ferdinand the bull and that damned Jennifer, but I'm still between the lines on highway 84, so that's something. The gas gage is low and I'm even lower, but on more positive notes, my bladder is fuller, and a sign back there said 'Lexington 144 mi.'

7:00 AM Saturday

Danni woke bright and cheery. When I relayed the info from the road sign, I had seen a mile or so back, she is cheered even more, gets in behind the wheel, and off we go toward Louisville, Lexington, and the Howard Farm. I give her some tepid coffee and drink some myself and then we share an aging cheese sandwich before I nod off.

I wake to the potholes in the New Fox Road and by the time we drive into the yard at the Howard Farm I have all the eye wipers wiped from my eyes. The SUV stops with a screech of the gravel. Jameson, Loretta, Jenni, and Bugs are running to meet us, and it feels like someone should be singing the green, green grass of home 'cause they've all come to meet us'. Far away I hear two horses neighing; there are hoof beats and barks keeping time to the laughter and song of the return of the Howard Farm farmers.

It was just a little after eleven. I think we set a new record. Boomers are competitive that way.

Chapter Seventeen: Home for Good

It took me a day or two to recover my usual farmer lifestyle. Danni, however, was right back to where she had been before we left. The primary reason for our trip had been to get the shin towels that she planned to use in perfecting her neo-evolution of the racehorse project. She still had academic aspirations it would seem, which is to say only that she still had very direct intellectual involvement in improvement of racehorse training methods in addition to an immediate goal of developing a very specific racehorse into a champion through her that training regimen.

The fact that we had each divested ourselves of past lives on the west coast was convenient but that had in no way precipitated our travels mid-April when so much could have transpired with her ostensible objectives that I had come to realize were very nebulous at best, non-existent at worst. So now in addition to the hands-on training approach using sensitivities of her palms, there were calibrated temperature measurements, graphs of the temperature profiles as functions of progress in the training process. Predictions of bone structural enhancement measurements still had to be done with palms or calipers, neither very precise to say the least. In the back of her mind, I think she was working on developing the inverse thermocouple effects to localize temperature increases.

I saw the twisted expressions and furrowed brow as she scribbled or drew rough sketches; there were the X-ray images of the foreleg of a horse she had laid nearby. I didn't believe they were Willow's. But I didn't know. All of that was the part of Danni's iceberg below the surface. Above the surface it was Danni as usual. Mostly I watched and interpreted, an interested bystander to be sure, but still outside the fence where the real stuff was happening.

"I need a portable X-ray machine adapted for equine application," she told me one evening.

"Can laymen purchase and use such devices? I suppose a vet could, huh?"

"Yes, I could get one and use it, but I'd need a radiology degree to be very effective with it. And I don't know how much damage I would be doing by repeatedly X-raying the same area."

I didn't have much information to contribute to the discussion, but I began scrolling through pages on radiology, learning bits and pieces about what is involved and hazards of the process.

"Did you know that Marylou is a radiologist?" Danni asked out of the blue.

No, I did not! But all I said was, "Uh-uh," and thought about not having needed X-ray vision to behold all the structural components of her variation of femella homo sapiens and hating myself for not having been able to erase that memory completely, except that it had helped to dull the memory of Jennifer.

"I think I'll see if she's interested in helping me."

"Oh my God," I thought and hoped to high heavens it wasn't audible.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" she asked—me... of all people, me. I ruminated, having not quite digested the question yet, and didn't know exactly how to formulate the result that would come out the other end, which should have been, "No!" or better yet, "Hell, no!" but wasn't expressed.

She continued, no-doubt sensing my reluctance, with, "It would give you a chance to pick a role for her as a 'good person' in one of your productions." She was teasing me and laughed at what I considered no laughing matter.

"Her role has already been determined as the untouchable Venus di Milo," I said at the portion of the Danni iceberg that faced me above the water mark, but I didn't know if that was the portion I was talking to.

"Oh, C'mon. I'm going to invite her down and see if she's interested in helping with our project."

'Our' project? Danni is smarter than that. There was a sense in which the Danni I know had become a black box quite aside from the wonderful woman I love, but in that sense in which she is a black box, I've been left to measure outputs as functions of known inputs to guess about wiring inside the box. There is without doubt some very complicated circuitry in there. I was afraid to push too many buttons.

Willow's training program got under way again to the obvious joy of Willow and Danni, Jameson, Jenni and Bugs, Blue, and, me. I trailer over to the training track with the principal pair to watch Willow's next work. It's impressive as always and one can sense in Jimmy as he comes back excited

about his mount and the gathered trainers at the rail who watch intently that there is a crescendo of anticipation.

After the work Danni is using her shin towels after her usual rubdown; Willow will be tethered in place for an hour or more, while measurements are being made to be displayed for Danni's assessment and later analyses. I am watching, and clandestinely document behavior, not measurements, so as not to make Danni at all self-conscious about her procedures. I have learned that much about documenting human behavior as laboratory research for my trade.

Yes, I am writing again as virtually everyone, that includes at least one 'good person', has encouraged me to do. Speaking of which, Marylou did come out to the training track for Willows next work about five days later. Danni hadn't seemed too interested in my going along that day, so after helping her load Willow in the trailer, I went in and worked at my trade for a couple of hours. I heard the pickup and trailer on the potholes when they returned and went out to join Jameson, vying for who would help with the unloading of Willow. Then I noticed a red Cadillac Escalade Sport Platinum driving in behind the trailer. It drove into the driveway and over to park closer to the house by where I was standing. Out of the shiny red Escalade stepped the classy red chassis of Marylou, the blessed Savior of Will of Steel and temptress of Richard T. O'Hare.

"Hello, Marylou," I sing, leaving off the "Goodbye, heart" part of the refrain.

Marylou in her part of this melodrama hopped me with her arms thrown tightly around my neck, singing the rest of the old Ricky Nelson signature song, "Goodbye, heart!" Then she trotted off laughing with Danni.

"Oh, my God," I said aloud to which she bubbled with joy.

I continued thinking, "Oh, my God," over and over again, silently I hoped, amid the bubbles.

We walked over to where Jameson had the tailgate down and Willow was inching her way out of the trailer, led by Danni who was all smiles. Willow's wraps indicate that the rubdown occurred at the training track as I'd expected. Marylou was standing over by Danni and Jameson, following an introduction and was now chatting Jameson up, obviously as charmed by his responses as we always are, and he with her. She was laughing as she talked with him, and

finally motioned toward her Escalade, to which he proceeded on demand, the rear of the vehicle opened upward as he approached. He reached in and began pulling out a large box. I mosied on over then to help him with whatever was in the box; I thought I knew what it was. It was. Danni had gotten her X-ray machine and radiologist.

“Oh, my fucking God!”

Danni, Willow, and their radiologist are walking off to the stable. Jameson and I follow with the box. “Goes to da stable,” Jameson told me.

“Doh no wha tis.”

“X-ray machine,” I tell him.

“Heavy doh.”

“Yeah, it is,” I’ve noticed.

“How come?” Jameson queries.

“I doh no neither,” I respond mixing our languages. “Danni’s about to prove something important.” I hoped that something would be exclusively about Willow, but I was by no means confident of the scope of this scientific experiment.

Danni had Willow secured in her stall. She and Marylou met us as we entered the stable. “Let’s put it in here for now,” Danni said motioning to the tack room. We sat it down. Then a buxom Marylou brushed by me to slash the seams of the box with a boxcutter she evidently carries with her. This added a new dimension to paranoid delusions of AR-47-toting vindictive exes from my previous life exemplified by Jennifer, none of which at least to my knowledge would ever have known how to cock a Red Ryder Beebe gun like the one I toted in my youth. I’m thinking that Marylou could probably do it, but with that box cutter she could do serious damage without invoking the NRA.

Danni is standing next to me watching the unveiling, obviously thinking different thoughts than I am. Jameson is rapt, and Loretta, who has joined the interested parties is agog; she looks at me. I shrug my shoulders. I do that a lot; I always have.

Danni and Marylou spent much of the day playing with the new device, no doubt emitting hazardous radiation. A radiologist with Marylou’s acumen on the subject of electromagnetic radiation, knows that, whether X-rays or just

plain flesh-colored visible light photons, it can do some serious damage that may have lasting side effects. She hasn't been very careful in that regard at flashing hazardous reflected light from surfaces that should have remained covered, but she's had considerable training with X-ray therapy, so I assume she knows everything that I found in my brief check on the internet. The increased risk of cancer is apparently, from a relativistic perspective, not very large. That's good. But I'm leery of her devices.

Later in the afternoon I was helping Danni with dinner just peeling some potatoes. Marylou came into the kitchen asking if there was anything she can do. Danni told her that she could help me peel vegetables. What? Why?

"Where's the peeler," Marylou asked, so I pointed to the drawer. She got it and sidled up next to me—right next to me, her left boob squeezed against my right arm. I grabbed for another potato; she grabbed for the same one. I stopped; she got the potato. She looked at me, saying, "sorry," very politely. I started to peel a different one. We finished the bunch; I cut them up with her watching me like I was some kind of famous chef teaching her how to cut up a God damned potato. She could do it faster with her box cutter.

"There are carrots," Danni said. Marylou went over and started whacking away at them.

Through all this Danni and Marylou were chatting about the new X-ray machine. I wasn't not needed any more, so I left to go to my office.

Yes, in case you're wondering, I did ultimately decide ultimately that the extra bedroom would indeed make an excellent office, and that I did in fact want an office. So I went in and sat behind my desk, not to actually do what I am wont to do in there, but just to sit and wait, because that is my chair. I was thinking about how annoyed I was at having. I realized that it was not just the having of company per se, but my perception of the real reason why Marylou was here and my attitude about her being here, and the nature of her behavior around me that I saw as not what her natural behavior would be if I were not in the mix. I didn't belong in the mix.

I realized that she had become somewhat of an obsession of mine. I don't really know why; it's different than any relationship I've ever had, which is of course the wrong word but I'm quite sure the correct word has not yet been

expressed by anyone. I look across the room at the portrait of Danni that now hangs in my office and consider the relationship of Johnny O and that woman. I need to understand that better I tell myself often when I look at the portrait. There is love and beauty with no jealous sensual attachment, a combination I have grappled with at times and never mastered. Beholding beauty without lust for holding it, for ‘having’ it. Then there’s Marylou. It seemed to me that we have a unique mutual obsession.

It occurred to me then in retrospect that if I had acted like the Richard T. O’Hare of old, whom she had expected to be in that hotel room that night, it would have been over by morning. She would never have told Danni anything about the affair and I would have lived another day ready for whatever came my way, indifferent to anything Marylou would ever do thereafter. Danni was the difference. She is the reason it didn’t happen and why it played out the way it did. She is the difference. I am not saying it’s her fault, just that she is why it played out one way rather than another. I don’t think any of us know quite how to handle the affair that didn’t happen.

In the context I thought about the Daniele in the painting, who wouldn’t ever have wanted to be the reason an affair happened or did not happen, either one. But there’s no closure. We need to close this thing out.

“Danni says dinner’s ready,” Marylou told me, peaking into my office and then stand there in the doorway staring at the portrait agog.

“Johnny O’Neal painted it,” I said.

She was obviously impressed, or she would have said she was impressed. Isn’t that the way people work? I assumed Marylou would react that way too. I don’t know. Finally she expressed herself beautifully with, “That belongs in the Smithsonian; it really does.”

I was up by her at the door, leaving. She grabbed my arm still facing the painting. “I wish someone would paint a picture like that of me,” she said.

That was how I knew it was sincere, unadulterated Marylou—the sibling rival Danni never had. Then we walked, with her locked on my arm, into the dining room where Danni had created a beautiful dinner, with salmon I didn’t know we had had, and accoutrements not usually seen at our table.

“Marylou brought the salmon to celebrate our return from the northwest,” Danni said as if it makes any sense at all, and all I could say was, “Oh.”

It was a delightful dinner; the conversations were most enjoyable as well. Marylou described her one visit to the northwest, her impression of the Space Needle views, skiing the wet snow of the cascades, whale watching, the jump from an airplane, the rain.

“Okay, so you were actually there,” Danni confirmed by joshing about her honesty of the rain.

It has become clear to me that these two women have become very best friends already and the bond is growing tighter all the time. After dinner, with cleanup finished I headed off to my office as they settled in together on the couch with that floozy Jenni cuddled up on Marylou’s lap. Danni insisted I join in the conversations, so I sat in the recliner that seems to have my name on it. Danni kept Marylou busy answering questions about herself. We find out that she is thirty-nine—and I think ‘holding’. She had been married once but not happily for long, and the two had mutually agreed they were better by themselves.

Her mother isn’t well, which I had gathered the day we had been up at Keeneland. Her father is having a hard time with it; he would like an assistant to take over his stable, but there’s no one he trusts; he’d mentioned Danni. Marylou assumed Danni wouldn’t want to, but “it is open for you if you want it. He has some good horses with real potential and is sure that you could win classics with them.”

She enjoys radiology and wouldn’t want to give it up after the educational commitment even to help her dad out. Her mom doesn’t want Marquart to give up his career for her, “he’s too young she says, even citing you, Danni, is what she says.”

She loves her Richard T. O’Hare books, has reread most of them several times, is waiting for another—and “I hope mom will recognize me in it when it comes out,” she teased me to both her and Danni’s merriment. I frowned as I was supposed to.

But as the evening wore on the conversation drifted on into the direction of racing and the training program of Willow. Danni gave Marylou a copy of the paper I had read when we were in the condo and explained the operation of her shin towels, showing her the plots that are generated when they are used. Gradually she was edging toward a description of her ultimate objective of not

just measuring what happens, but of programming what one wants to happen using the inverse thermocouple effect. Marylou was glowing with enthusiasm for the project.

“That’s where I come in, isn’t it?” she trilled. “You need to continuously measure and modify the bone growth progress in order to obtain the structure to support the function safely. That’s it, isn’t it Danni?” They hugged; not feeling completely comfortable with it and got up to go to my office.

“Ricky don’t leave,” Danni insisted. “A bunch of this was your idea, remember. You called it ‘neo evolution’ and that’s what it is. Instead of introducing gene mutations as the discrete adaptation adjustors, we introduce stepped changes to the environmental hazards as the new speciation driver.”

“No, that wasn’t my idea, Danni. It was just my feeble expression of what I understand to be the full impact of what you’re attempting.”

“This is so exciting,” Marylou sprinkled glee into the conversation. And then she looked at her watch and said, “Goodness Me! It’s after midnight. I have to let you folks get some sleep. I have a long way to go to Cynthiana.”

I was wondering what phase ‘Cynthiana’ has to do with her psychedelic trip, but Danni clarifies that it’s a place on planet earth.

“Stay,” Danni reacted instantly. “There’s a single bed in Ricky’s office. We’ll make it up.” She stood and offered a hand to Marylou; “Let’s get some sheets.”

This was not the direction I would have steered this, but I’m the guy who drove us off the road somewhere in Nebraska.

Chapter Eighteen: Expansion

“Hello, Marylou.”

It goes without saying that none of this was in any plan I could ever have conceived in a million years. But the gradual development of a stable habitat is what enables the behavior of a given specie to co-evolve with the various other species within that habitat. One specie depends upon another for its survival. I think that’s a fairly accurate portrayal of the nature of evolution. Neo evolution too must have its habitat but the whole idea of the neo aspect of evolution is the major foreshortening of time. I think it is fair to say that Howard Farm is the habitat for this experimentally induced development. And as a laboratory version of more major phenomena, everything is scaled down. Individuals are forced to play the roles of species in Danni’s little drama. To make this whole thing work, in addition to a Danni, there had to be a Will Of Steel, and that required a Jameson, who required a Loretta, and there’s a Blue Berry Hill, and Danni for some reason required a Richard, necessitating a Jenni who needed a Bugs. Every required role requires a new species to fill it. And this one-thing-depending-on-another has to be closed like the proverbial snake swallowing its own tail, becoming a ring. Or what in mathematics is called a ‘group’. In the down-sized neo version of this theory individuals replace entire species, and thus radiology requires a Marylou to bite the tail of this monster.

Of course I’ve overcomplicated the process of oversimplifying the entire situation. Can you imagine the omniscience required during those first seven days of Genesis or the headaches of Noah or Danni? My God!

So, anyway, Marylou has been added to the Howard Farm experiment. With foreshortening of time, it happened that first night. Danni led the way into ‘our’ (like Danni and my) bedroom with Marylou following, who, once in there, saw Johnny O’s masterpiece of Danielle as the femella homo sapiens, of which Marylou could not get enough. She was clearly awestruck by it. Her amazement at the clothed figure of Danni in my office had been but a minor prelude. Danni was at ease with the portrayal of herself in both roles and the search for sheets devolved into a discussion of the situation of the painting of

Danielle O’Neill. Marylou’s usual craving of Danni’s roles resulted in a exclamation of how she wanted one done of her, which of course, the death of Johnny O would seem to have totally precluded, and what I perceived as what Marylou perceived as the real tragedy. I oversimplify and complicate it all at once again, I suppose.

Whether as her peculiar form of humor or as going with the flow, Danni reinflated Marylou’s balloon by saying, “Not to worry, Ricky can paint.”

Having overheard her make that foolhardy statement from my office, I yelled out, “No, he fucking can’t!”

Well, you can imagine where that went, even if I apparently couldn’t at the time.

The next cat out of that bag was a cupboard opening and Danni saying, “Look, he did this one of Jenni’s namesake.”

Oh my fucking God!

Marylou was instantly transported into my office brandishing the portrait of Jennifer, ineptly depicted in the flesh by yours truly, Danni right behind her laughing her fool head off. My role in the emerging habitat reality show was not one I relish. I had reunited with Danni after decades because I had finally realized how meaningless my life had become without her and how enjoyable it was with her. But in the enlarged scope of my life with her, it sometimes feels like I’ve become a sparring partner of a great fighter, proud with a sense of importance, but aware as I pick myself up off the mat that mine is not a role to be envied.

I screamed, “Danni, put that thing away or I’ll rip it to shreds!”

The girls ran out, Marylou laughing hilariously, but I heard the cupboard door slam shut. That’s good. I think Danni must have put an end to Marylou’s unrealistic expectations.

Next, they were in my office with sheets, making up a bed on what had always before been a visitor couch. I left the room to some tittering, but there was nothing suggestive from that time on. When Marylou stayed over, it was in that bed in my office, and I was never in there at the same time. I was aware that when a foreign specie is introduced into a habitat as a method to alleviate some negative aspect of one or another other species that had become a destructive nuisance, it usually doesn’t go well. That certainly jaded my

early conception of the introduction of Marylou into Eden. But I readily admit that she did fit in comfortably before long with neither of us overly obsessed sensually about the other, the mutual obsession having become more of a mutual admiration for the attributes and abilities of the other. The three of us settled into relationships that worked effectively together. Danni and I remained sensually enamored and sexually active with each other; Marylou, although loved in a very real sense by both of us had her own outside sensual interests, if any. She came and went as she pleased, but always came if she was needed.

Willow was on an approximate five-day schedule of works, that on several occasions involved trailering her to Keeneland, where the usual band of fans would be gathered to watch her performance. The band was growing to where on one occasion there must have been a hundred people who watched as she worked with another horse; it was only a short way before the other horse was distanced and his rider pulled him up to finish in a leisurely gallop. Usually after Danni had rubbed Willow down and wrapped her, we convened with the others to the track kitchen.

The shin towels were employed regularly in assessing progress on hairline shin fractures and radiological measurements were used, but less frequently, to assess bone structural progress. The measurements were plotted, and trends established that guided Danni's training decisions.

Marylou was our connection to the Keeneland track. She knew virtually everybody, what they do, how they do it, and what is the best way to get them to do it for you if you want it done. It was Wes's wheedling on steroids. She set up work schedules for Danni and arranged to have a top jockey available to ride Willow for the work. She also kept Danni aware of the meet schedule and in that regard informed her that opportunities of a race in the spring meet for Willow had passed. Danni knew that and had intentionally let the meet pass as she had previously informed me.

Whether Willow would ever race was of little consequence to Danni; she cared primarily in training her to be her best and secondarily in proving it to the racing public. The three of us came to agree that if Willow's soundness was unquestionable as we all supposed it would be by the fall, provably by actual scientific data to Danni, she would run in one major stake in the fall

meet. So with that issue paused for the summer other issues that had come up received priority.

However, Derby week was on us now; it was big for Marylou, but not so much for Danni or me. With Derby Week Marylou was in Louisville with the Churchill Downs twin steeples, spires, whatever they are. She was into all the hoopla, celebrities in town, Hats, and juleps. I had been shocked enough to learn that I would not be permitted to wear jeans to the races at Keeneland. I don't know about Churchill Downs. Kentucky takes its racing seriously.

Marylou had her favorites for the run for the roses, chief among them the Bluegrass winner, owners, trainers, and jockeys. She was one of the high-end racetrack urchins. I'm guessing she's one of those 2,500 owners of various Limited Liability Corporations that own Sierra Leone. She is definitely racing bourgeoisie to Danni's proletariat. I was neither; I watched the classics but had never followed racing's upper echelons enough to know more than the race-day pundits had to say about the races. But we were close enough to the heartbeat of racing for Derby day to be a big deal.

I knew enough to bet that when the Derby was over, Marylou would be suggesting a match race for the non-starter Willow against Kentucky's best, and she would not even see it in the context of Ruffian—or maybe she would, who knows with Marylou. At any rate, Marylou was occupied other than at Howard farm for a while.

Jameson wanted to purchase a Thoroughbred of his own, a weanling by a decent stallion that he had found to be for sale. The breeder who had offered him the foal privately and at a very reasonable price may have had in mind that the horse might be trained by Danni when it reached racing age which might make his breeding stock more valuable. Jameson knew what breeders were thinking and even told Danni the same, emphasizing that he would make no commitment – “olny pozble, I telim.”

Danni liked even the possibility of being able to test her theories starting with a weanling rather than a late two-year-old. Jameson told Danni that she would be its trainer if she wanted to “else he run not atall”.

“Is he straight?” Danni asked.

“Sure iz; straight as a crow bar all roun.”

“Did you see his papers,” Danni asked.

“Yesum, here tar,” and he handed Danni a list of papers one of which had a three-generation pedigree.

Looking at the pedigree and thinking for a moment, she seemed shocked. “Is this for real, Jameson?”

“Yez tiz, Danni. Olsens own da mare an stud long time; he brake down, din run. Mare nuther. Been years; never breed ‘em; outta d bizness til dis one. Dey don no whatta do wid im. Dey like im.”

“Those are really long generations—over twenty years average.” Then, “It gets back to Bold Ruler in a hurry”

Jameson looked confused.

“Bold Ruler shows up in four and five removes and at least once in each of his grandparents. That’s not a currently fashionable pedigree because no one has seen one like this in thirty years. This would have been an extremely expensive colt thirty years ago, Jameson. It’s a pedigree that’s no longer available. If the colt is straight, I think that’s a great deal. You ought to go ahead and take it. If you need more cash, I’m all in.”

“I buy ‘im; dey wan ta wean an alter break im fore shippin. Be lil while.”

“Good,” Danni said. “He’s a late foal—sixth of May; probably September before they wean him. I want to look up that pedigree in more detail. Those four infusions of Bold Ruler through the most prepotent of his male offspring is intriguing. That is a genetic filter of the very best genes from Bold Ruler. I think that distaff line is solid too. Just let me check the black type in the first few removes on the bottom side. We can talk about that later, Jameson. Just buy him.”

So the purchase was agreed but on hold because the foal had not yet been weaned.

Loretta and Jameson had to take a few days to go down into Tennessee for the funeral of their son in law. Several days after their return Jameson began hinting around about necessary changes to the farm. Among those were Jameson and Loretta’s wish to have a self-sufficient farm. A bigger ‘garten’ plot for next year, Jameson wanted a cow, more chickens than they currently had, etc. More work would be required on the place to accommodate more

stock. Jameson was pushing his seventies like us and although apparently in good health, he thought we needed some help with the heavier work.

He had a plan for that too, which he laid out to Ricky and Danni one evening when he and Loretta ventured over after supper. Surprised, but happy to see them, Danni poured us all coffee and put cookies on each saucer. The four of us then set about to discuss his plan. When they had been down in Tennessee to attend the funeral, they had seen the conditions that Maybelle and her family were living in and were saddened by it.

“Dey need elp,” Jameson said. Loretta added that, “They are ambitious good people. Our grandson makes almost nothing for working hard all day to provide for the family and his wife also works hard all day cuttin’ up chickens. Maybelle takes care of their two charming children all day.

“Dey’s rent go up big too. It’s hard.”

“Would you want to bring them all up here?” Danni asked.

“Is there enough room in that house or do we need to add on?” I asked Jameson.

“We think we have enough room in the old Howard house.” Loretta answered. “We could put them all up. And them dear children are very well behaved. They would not get in your way at all. We’d keep it separate.”

“What’s your grandson’s name?” I asked.

“Thomas,” Loretta answered.

“What does Thomas do now?” I followed up asking.

“He bilder,” Jameson said.

“Carpentry?”

“Yesum, plummin, lectricle too, he work on carz, you name it. He hard worker.”

“What’s he getting paid now?” Danni asked.

“Nah much. Doh madder, we doh need no moh,” Jameson insisted.

“People improving this farm get paid a fair wage, Jameson.” Danni insisted. “Ricky and I have enough money to keep us all comfortable. If we get this place self-sufficient, we’ll all be saving money. You two are half owners of this farm and you have the same decision-making authority that we have. And your house is your house. It is really nice knowing your plans, but you go ahead and do what needs to be done. Together, maybe Loretta and I

can work out the financial arrangement to keep us all comfortably off. Right, Ricky.”

“Yes. Right. That’s an excellent idea. I would just ask that Maybelle and Thomas – and what’s his wife’s name?”

“Lulu,” Jameson answered.

“Yeah, good. Lulu. Okay. That they arrange things with you all and we deal financially with the two of you and you deal with them for now until we know them better. It’ll keep things simpler.”

“Yesum. Corse.”

“How soon do you expect they could be up here?” Danni asked.

“I tink Thomas give two weeks da boss. Lulu probly too. So two, tree week.”

“Do they have much furniture to move?”

“No,” Loretta said. “They have so little. We need to buy a mattress or two. That’s about it, we think. Thomas has some tools, huh, Jimmy?”

“Yesum, he do. He bring dem.”

“We’ll get more hens and the cow before they’re all here,” Loretta said. “Jameson can do that.” And they rose to leave.

“Well, good,” Danni summed up. “This was fun. We need to get together like this more often. There are a lot of things to talk about in running this farm as partners.”

After they were gone Danni told me how close she feels to ‘these people’. “They are ‘my’ people,” she said. “I love them.”

Once again, “Me too,” was the only appropriate response.

Danni expressed her excitement about coming changes to Howard farm. “I love what we’ve done with this place, Ricky, and what we’re planning to do. Without you, none of it would have happened.

“I’m just standing at the fence looking in,” I told her honestly. “It’s fun to watch.”

“Maybe,” she conceded, “But you’re holding my hand now as I jump up and down on my pogo stick.”

“Yezum,” I said, “Ah iz doin at an luvin it.”

By the first of June the Taylors had a presence on the farm. They tended to keep pretty much out of sight except for Nathan who was thirteen, very shy, but loved horses. When Danni was out in the stable, he would stand in the shadows close enough to hear and to look around a corner at what Danni was doing. I could see him from the house, but if I went out, he'd disappear. He'd never been around horses much Jameson said, but he took to Blue. I'd see he and Blue together out in the pasture when Willow was stalled or away at the training track, Blue would be grazing peacefully, Jenni and Bugs nearby, with Nathan having an arm up over Blue's withers talking or singing away. One time I decided to go out to see if he'd be willing to talk to me. Seeing me walking out to where he was and between him and the buildings where he'd feel safe, he looked scared like he was cornered. Danni and I had mentioned how shy the kids were and figured it was because they had been told to not bother us. So as I got closer, I started speaking to him.

"You like that horse, Nathan?"

"Yezer, a lot."

"You know how to ride?"

"No. No, don't."

"Would you like to ride Blue?"

"Yez, but I'z scared."

"Don't need to be. Blue's fun to ride. Want us to saddle him up?"

"Yes." He brightened up. "Now?"

"Why not. Do you know how to lead him?"

"Think so," he said as he reached down to grab Blue's halter. Blue raised his head and Nathan leaned over holding his head affectionately. They knew each other pretty well already, I could tell.

"You want a saddle, or you rather ride bareback?"

"Bareback maybe; don't know."

We were walking together back to the stable with him leading Blue. Loretta had just come out to the garden to get some greens when she saw Nathan leading Blue. I was back on the other side of Blue, so she didn't see me at first.

"Nathan, you leave Blue alone. He ain't yours."

“Could be, I suppose,” I told Loretta; it scared her, having not seen me before. “We could share. Blue would like to be ridden more than I ride him I think.”

“They been told to leave you folks alone,” Loretta said. “They don’t need to be bothering you none.”

“He isn’t bothering me. I went out and bothered him. You all own half of every acre of this farm just like we do, and this farm needs kids and a little bit of noise. We love having the Taylors here in case you haven’t figured that out yet,” I laughed.

“Yeah!” Nathan said.

“Well, okay then, but you send him home, if he bothers you.”

“Alright,” I said. “But right now we’re going for a ride.”

She walked on to the garden. We were in the stable now, where I said, “This is Blue’s bridle—he blue one. When you want to ride him, you can use it, but until you get good at it you better have someone with you like your parents or grandparents, or Danni or me. But after you get the hang of it, it’s up to your mom and dad whether you can ride whenever you want if Blue’s here. Sometimes we take him to the track with us, but he’s usually here.” I was putting the bridle on slowly as he watched so he’d get the idea. I took it off and handed it to him.

“You want to do it?”

“Yes, Sir.” He did a very credible job of it.

“Good job,” I said. “Now I could lift you up there, and pretty soon you’ll be able to just grab his mane and jump up there by yourself, but I think you ought to lead him over by that box and hop up there by yourself, don’t you think so.”

“Yes, Sir!” he said and lead Blue over to the box. I noticed Jameson was watching now with Loretta and little Sadie right behind. Nathan was up there on Blue all smiles.

“Why don’t you show him how to use those reins Jameson? You’re one hell of a lot better horseman than I am.”

“Oh noh sir, you are eggselent horsmun. But I take dis kid offn yur hands, yeh c’mon boy, dis is whut dese tings are fur.” And he was leading Blue and Nathan on out into the pasture, showing Nathan how to neck rein. I heard him

saying, “Racin’ horses dohn neck rein, ridin horses duz.” Loretta and I stood there watching and laughing at Jameson and Nathan.

Sadie spoke up, “I want to ride.”

“I’m guessing you’ll get to ride too,” I said. Then to Loretta, “How old is Sadie?”

“I’m ten years old,” Sadie spoke for herself.

It was a good moment. This farm had needed more such moments.

Danni drove into the yard just then with Willow in the trailer after a work. I walked over and lowered the tailgate for Danni to back Willow out. She spoke with Loretta as she led Willow to her stall.

“Can I pet her?” Sadie asked.

“Sure,” Danni said. “She’d love it.”

Then looking out the far doorway she saw Jameson with Nathan on Blue further away. “Nathan’s riding?” She exclaimed, “Oh, that’s wonderful.” We had all walked out to join Jameson watching Nathan. “Jameson,” Danni addressed him, “This farm is finally coming back to what it was in its hay day, isn’t it?”

“It sho is, Danni. It sho nuff is. Dan’l an Maybelle, they be appy. Betcha they would.”

Thomas and Lulu had not arrived yet. They were finishing out their job terminations that had been prolonged, without which the pay that was due, that they had already ‘earned’, would not be paid. But they would soon be out of there.

“And they are so happy,” Maybelle said. She had joined the group in the yard and accepted the applause for having helped raise these two charming grandchildren.

Soon Nathan would be kneeling in the shed row right in front of Danni watching her take care of Willow’s legs and asking occasional questions so that Danni asked if he wanted to try it with Blue. He learned quickly and he would do Blue up after riding him.

Chapter Nineteen: The Future of Howard Farm

The Kentucky summer heat was different than any summer I'd ever been used to, hotter and much more humid. Fireflies are not seen in the west, but evenings here are filled with tiny flashing lights through the night sky; it is very pleasant. Earlier, mostly before our trip west, but some after, there had been lightning flashes and loud clapping thunder unlike anything I had ever gotten used to. It was for real, unlike the west and there had been a tornado watch that had not got this far north this year. So it's different than what I've been used to. My career—to the extent that it is, or was, a career—did not involve weather in any capacity other than reading about it as it applied to the region about which I happened to be writing. I almost always ended up going there to get a kind of a hands on feel for what I wrote, but it's not like being a farmer in the region, or at least a horse farmer's husband, in the locale about which you write. When one is writing about the one you live with and love on that farm, you experience weather in a very different way, in a very personal way. It was coming onto the dog days of summer to which Jenni, Bugs, and I adapted by increasing our laziness. But not Danni.

“It's how a president paid off a porn star,” I said.

“No, no, no! Yuk! I just wanted to know what you know about LLCs.”

“Well, that was the first thing that came to my mind. I'm sorry, but it's been on the news so much, why wouldn't that be the first thing to come to my mind on that topic.”

“That's all you know about it?” was her scornful reply. “That's not very helpful.”

“No, it isn't, is it? Well, I know that LLC is an acronym, and I think it stands for Limited Liability Corporation,” I responded. “Oh, and I am aware that over 2,500 people, probably including Marylou Johnson, had been united in the ownership of one thoroughbred horse who happens to have won the Kentucky Derby. But you knew that, and I am guessing that that is the more relevant aspect than the porn star application of LLCs. Am I right?”

“You are absolutely correct, Mister O’Hare. I have no interest in the porn star application unless there is something you need to tell me, about which I would be very interested. The story of all those women between Amanda and Daniele must be worth telling someday if we run out of money.”

“You’re the one who started this conversation. Where is it going?”

“Where is it going... Well, I don’t know what LLCs have to do with it, but I worry some about the security of the Jameson’s and Taylors...”

“Yeah?” I interrogate.

She responded thoughtfully: “Well I know we wrote Jamesons into our will and we do talk of them as equal owners of Howard Farm, but they aren’t actually, are they. They’re sort of at our mercy one would probably have to say, huh?”

“So you want to formalize what we’ve agreed to without having a solid legal basis? Do you think an LLC is the right approach?” I asked.

“I don’t know is the thing. But remember that financial advisor you had taking care of your finances before we merged them into mine.”

“Roberta,” I answered.

“Roberta,” she repeated with a twist. “Was she one who went through the revolving door?”

“Nelson was her last name.” I ignored the inuendo. “I can get you her text number if you want to ask her any questions.”

“Do,” she said, so I did.

“Is there any reason for me to be involved in your discussion with her? She’s very helpful and easy to talk to.” I got up and took my iPhone back to my office.

I heard snippets of Danni’s conversation, indicating that she had placed a call rather than just texting.

I went on back to my business, which isn’t much, but I pattered around the yard a bit and walked on down to the river with the kids. Later Danni told me we needed to talk, which was, of course, what we were doing when she told me that, but it got more down to brass tacks, as they say, after that.

“We need to formalize our joint ownership of the farm; we don’t have any descendants to worry about, but the Jamesons do. I think we probably need to

incorporate the farm in all our names. What do you think? Do you have any reservations about it?"

"I agree without reservation. How do you propose to do it? Was Roberta helpful?"

"Roberta is charming. She said to tell you hello by the way; she thinks you owe her a call." Danni laughed. "On another note, she wasn't sure an LLC was ideal for our purposes. She mentioned other partnership options that I think we should all discuss together. Let's have them over tonight. Would you run that by Jameson?"

Afterward Loretta came over and suggested we come over to their place this time. So that's where the second meeting of Howard Farm Cooperative members took place. Maybelle, Lulu and the children were all there for treats. Thomas had another week before his employer would complete payment for his last month on the job. The children retreated to another room soon and Jameson asked whether it would be okay if Maybelle and Lulu sat in so they would know the status of the arrangements.

We agreed. Then Danni and I explained our concern for the security of their families in not having a formalized partnership agreement of the farm, and that although Danni and I do have our wills set up to transfer ownership to Jamesons, if anything should happen to the Jamesons before our demise and then we died too, the Taylors might be vulnerable, etcetera.

"Thomas worries about it," Lulu said.

"There were reasons for him to be concerned. Let's fix them," I said.

So Danni took over explaining what she had learned from Roberta with regard to LLCs and other methods of protecting partnerships.

"I think Loretta and I should work out details of the solution like we did before and then run what we come up with by all of us. Hopefully Thomas will be here by then."

Loretta and Danni came up with an approach to co-ownership of all assets on the farm, which included Willow, Blue, and the weanling to arrive soon with a caveat that only Danni was allowed to care for and decide issues with regard to Willow. But should she ever earn any purse moneys, they would be the property of the Howard Farm partnership. Moneys earned from products of the farm would similarly be shared.

That was the final issue on getting the Howard Farm to where Danni felt it should be, and it definitely brought happiness to all residents.

Chapter Twenty: Preparations for a Race

The Keeneland Fall Meet would feature racing five days a week through October. Marylou's expertise and abilities would be key to finding the right situation for Willow's debut. Danni's requirements would be hard to match up with the races that are scheduled and those that would be written in from day to day.

All of us were aware that Will of Steel's race, although her debut, would probably also be her finale. She was not beginning with a maiden race, let alone for a claim, that is how most racehorses begin their careers, even for outstanding prospects like Secretariat, who began in a maiden race that was won by Quebec and three other horses finished in front of him. Of course there was an excuse. There always is. He was defeated four other times with excuses for each coming to the fore after the fact. It all preceded a twenty-one-length victory in the Belmont and sixteen wins in twenty-one races for him to become known as the iron horse. But that was not Ruffian-esque.

Danni was not prepared for Willow to suffer such defeats. She once quoted the great trainer Allen Jerkins who is said to have said something like, "If I had known where to run my horses, Secretariat would have retired with two more wins," because his horses, Onion and Prove Out had both defeated the 'iron horse'. Her takeaway was that Secretariat should not have been allowed to run in those races. Something must have been wrong. "A horse can't speak English," she'd say. "You have to be able to read the signs and be willing to scratch if your horse isn't right."

Those were just some of the cautions that needed to be taken into account in determining what race should be the target for this endeavor. Danni didn't like talking about the specifics, so one day I went for a private walk down by the river and called Marylou. She was aware of the dilemma, so it didn't take much of an introduction to get her on topic.

"We need to find the race for Willow," I said. "Danni won't address that issue when I mention it. But I think if we find a good spot that addresses her concerns and you promote it, she'll focus on that schedule."

“Willow has all the Breeders’ Cup nominations,” Ricky, “so can you and I just conspire to have that first race be in the Breeders’ Cup Challenge Series so that,” she paused implying significance here, “she’s eligible to run on the Breeders’ Cup World Champions day at Del Mar in San Diego at the end of October. If Willow wins a Challenge Series event as impressively as we both know she will, then that’ll make it difficult to refute her eligibility.”

“So we need a Breeder’s Cup challenge in the first week or two at the Keeneland Fall Meet,” I respond.

“Right,” Marylou answered. “That’s what we’ll do. Call me some time tomorrow morning when Danni’s not around and I’ve had a chance to check around about who is planning to run where so we know what we’re talking about when we try to persuade Danni. Right now I’m thinking the six-furlong Grade 2 Thoroughbred Clubhouse race for fillies and mares; Willow is a Kentucky bred. Let’s not mention the possibility of a next race to Danni, right?”

“Right.”

So next morning I spoke with Marylou again. What she had found out about those planning to enter the race was that the presumed favorite was the frontrunning winner of a couple of stakes. “She’s fast, but I’m sure Willow’s faster. So do you agree that that race is our target?”

“Sounds like the right spot,” I said.

“Okay if I come out this afternoon?”

“Yeah. We’ve been missing you.”

“We?”

“Yes, we, including a large component of me.”

“Good. I like thinking of that component,” she laughed and was gone.

Danni was excited to see Marylou when she arrived; they hugged—kissed, actually. “I was going to call you,” Danni said. “I’m going up to Keeneland to use the track for a little longer work the day after tomorrow, I was hoping you could help arrange that for me.”

“I will, I will,” was Marylou’s enthusiastic response. “There’s some exciting racing coming up.”

“It seems like an age since we’ve seen you,” Danni said. “What’s been happening in your life, Marylou?”

“Oh, you know. Well, after Derby week Mom took worse, and I was with her for a few weeks.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Danni empathized. “How is she now?”

“Dead.”

Danni was shocked and so was I. I hadn’t thought to ask about anything in her life during our conversations except our mutual overlap.

Marylou didn’t wait for our lame responses, she just said, “Well, it’s over finally.”

Danni started to ask how and only got as far as “how...”.

“She opted for assisted suicide. Dad and I didn’t like it, but it was her choice. She had been in so much pain for so long. So I repeat: It’s over. Now, about Willow’s race.”

My gears were grinding. Marylou could move from one event to another with more ease than I have ever witnessed in anyone else. She is definitely not a shallow person; it must be a discipline she imposes on herself is what I’m thinking. Healthy, I suppose.

“There’s a six-furlong fillies-and-mares race that fits Willow to a T, I’d say. Rumor has it, the favorite is the speed horse Snowballaholic. I think Willow’s faster. Probably a small field.” Having finished with the message she stood there staring at Danni, her lips pursed.

I was watching Danni too.

“Okay,” Danni said. “That’s what it will be. We’ll work six furlongs on Tuesday.”

“It feels like champagne time,” Marylou sang out. “This ship is about to sail!”

After slapping hands joyously, Danni meandered off, then left the house. We watched as she headed out toward the stable. We knew this development would be discussed with Willow.

“She’s got Willow,” Marylou said. “You’ve got me.”

Before I could move away, I found myself in the middle of a kiss. I don’t know how one gets in the middle of a kiss, but I was there, and it was a thing. A real thing, yes, a palpable reality. And then it was over, but it would never be completely over. The two of us were walking together joyfully out toward the stable to be with the rest of us. Nathan was there and there came Sadie.

Tuesday came. The entire farm was up early. Jameson was driving up with the kids to witness something special. Jimmy had arrived as the one Danni had settled on as Willow's eventual jockey. He had got licensed and was beginning his apprenticeship, thrilled with everything that was happening to him.

Danni had checked Willow over carefully before putting her traveling boots on and led her out to the trailer. And off we went, a caravan of pilgrims on a mission.

The usual crowd was there at the rail with each of the usual suspects having a party of several more of their friends who wanted to witness Willow firsthand. Jameson and the two kids were at the rail a little further along.

Marylou had arranged with her father to have one of Marquart's fillies pace Willow for a quarter or a half if she could keep up. "She's a nice filly," he told Danni. "After the three-eights-pole I'm going to have the boy ease her back. I don't want to ruin her." Danni requested the other filly be on the rail so Willow wouldn't expect to have the rail all the way around. As the two fillies backtracked at a jog, I felt excitement mount around me and within. I was between Danni and Marylou away from the rest when they began the work at the head of the back stretch. It was goosebump time, or as Sherwood Anderson had written, we were all experiencing the 'fantods'

The first quarter went in 22 seconds flat, Johnson's filly was starting to back off a little, she was back two full lengths by the three-eights-pole and was brought to a gallop to finish out her lap. But Willow passed the quarter pole with a time of 45 $\frac{2}{5}$ and finished up at 1:10 flat. Mouths were gaping open but silent.

When she pulled up and Danni had the lead snapped on her halter, Jimmy said, "I didn't touch her ma'am. I couldn't get her to go any slower for that first three eights. I tried a little, but I didn't want to fight her none."

"You did good, Jimmy. You didn't feel any bad steps or anything?"

"No, Ma'am. She just floated."

There was the usual cooling out with spectators, me offering Willow water that she usually snubbed, a sponge washing, scraping off, and walking, which was again my proud part in the production. Meanwhile Danni discussed the

work with Marquart and Marylou; a couple other officials and major trainers listened in. Danni's unalterable rubdown procedure took place after Willow had been cooled down.

Jameson and the two kids came over to the barn to watch. The kids were wired. Jameson said, "I be takin dem hohm outta da way now."

We did the brief time in the kitchen, got our hugs and kisses from Marylou and were on our way to Howard Farm.

Danni was antsy from that day forward. She checked on Willow too many times a day. Nathan seemed to notice everything. He asked me one day after the school bus dropped him and Sadie off at the end of Old Fox Road. "Is Aunt Danni alright?"

"She's anxious," I told him. "Everything has to be perfect for Willow's race. Best to just leave her be with Willow. She needs to concentrate, or at least she thinks she does." We both laughed knowingly.

Sadie looked at us like we were male chauvinist pigs talking about a woman that way. We laughed at her, and she stalked off.

"You have much homework today?"

"Nope, don't. Catfishing?"

"Why not," I respond, and we grab our poles and head out through the woods to the river. We got us several nice catfish and a couple perch. I took a nice catfish in for our dinner; Nathan took the rest.

Willow had another half mile work at the training track with all the usual care redoubled. Marylou was there to watch and talk to Danni about entries which was not far in the future now. There was a little clearer picture of who would be in the race. Same favorite unless word of Willow changes that. It's going to be a small field – between six and eight. Did Danni want to come up to the secretary's office to enter or would she prefer phoning it in. Marylou would be there with her father. "It's the second day of the meet, everyone'll be hyped still."

"I'll phone it in," Danni said.

When Danni went out to Willow after goodbyes were said, I walked out to the red Escalade with Marylou.

“You make sure she enters,” Marylou cautioned. “Call me if she hesitates for any reason. We have to get this done, Ricky. This is our mission in life.” She kissed me the big one again and was gone.

Danni did the entry by phone. She seemed calm but as soon as she hung up, she went out to bug Willow with apologies no doubt. Willow was most likely thinking, “What’s with you girl, we got this!

I still have my fingers through the woven wire fence and I’m looking in at the horseracing world, but the wires are hot now and I have more at stake than ever before. It is I who feel like I’m on the pogo stick and I couldn’t ever make a pogo stick bounce even once. I just want this race over—safely. Please God, let it be safely. Willow and Danni need ‘safely’. All of us do.

Chapter Twenty-One: The Race

The Keeneland Fall Meet has some features of its racing schedule that are similar to my base memory at Longacres racetrack fifty years and twenty-five-hundred miles away. The dirt track is open for training from 5:30 AM to 11:00 AM. There's racing five days a week Wednesday through Sunday. But that's about it. There are millions of dollars in purses and graded stakes every race day. Willow's race is a Breeders' Cup Challenge race with a \$350,000 purse. There are three other races that day with larger purses and another of the same amount. Cinderellas don't enter these races. These are among the best horses in the world.

That's the hype we tried not to think about. It's just Willow's maiden race that just happens to have a \$350,000 purse, with all the other horses in the race having already won or placed in stake races. For her they will just be horses and maybe a little more fun than the ones she was allowed to work with in the past. For Danni who learned how to train horses from her parents when she was a child, this had been a training development enterprise just as it has been for every other trainer of a horse in the field, but some have been training all during those fifty years and might well be slated for the Hall of Fame. Danni was doing something else during those fifty years, but always leading up to this. To doing it the right way, adapting to her horse's needs rather than to a racing schedule.

Danni decided we would ship up the day before the race. Blue would trailer with us this time. He would be the pony horse before the race. Blue and I would pony Willow over for the race. Jameson would act as groom leading Willow into the paddock for saddling. After Danni had saddled Willow and given Jimmy a leg up, Jameson would lead her out to the track where I would dismount, and Danni would take my place ponying Willow in the post parade like she had done so many times at Longacres so long ago; she would keep Willow calm. That was the plan that Danni had worked over many discussions with Jameson and me.

Everything was different than on the days we'd trailered up for works, the parking lot, people were milling around, already horses were being led up to

the gap. Marylou was right where she said she'd be, all smiles. It brought a smile to Danni's face for the first time in at least twenty-four hours. She brought a smile to my lips too. She showed Danni where she could be found if Danni needed her and told Danni she would be with her tomorrow all day if she was wanted; she wouldn't interfere unless Danni wanted her to handle reporters or anything else that came up. "Your duties with Willow will not be interfered with; period. I will make sure of that," she said.

Everything did go as planned. At Keeneland when the horses reached the track from the paddock Tom Gilcoyne bugled his Boots and Saddles, the post parade having begun. After Danni mounted Blue, I walked into the paddock and out to the stands where Marylou met me, clinging to my arm until we reached the box from which we watched the post parade. Jameson insisted on standing near the winner's circle to be able to pick up Willow when Jimmy brought her back. I would of course be down there too to pick up Blue when Danni dismounted to do her winner's circle duties that we had also planned out. There was no plan for if Willow lost.

So I'm in the box with Marylou worrying about what happens if Willow does not win.

"There is absolutely no way that can happen," Marylou convinced me but I wasn't sure whether it was because she is convincing that it was true.

We are clinging to each other emotionally if not physically and watching Willow and Danni jog along on Blue. Marylou has her binoculars but with my glasses I prefer to just watch without magnification. She tells me every jog and head toss.

The odds on the tote board are settling down with Snowballaholic favored at 3-to-2, Willow now second at 2-to-1, down considerably from the morning line that was 8-to-1 on the program. She had drawn the number four post position, Snowballaholic drew the two-hole in the seven-horse field. The start would be critical I knew.

The bell rang and "They're off!" I'm not at the fence; I'm in this thing. Marylou is the fence I'm up tight against. I missed their break from the gate somehow. I'm looking for the blue and white silks. There is the call of the race, "*Down the back side they go, Snowballaholic on the lead by a head, Will of Steel second by two*" (already by two I think). Then "*The first quarter in in*

21 and 3. Now its Snowballaholic ahead by a head. Will of Steel second and, back five to... “(whatever). Then, “Into the far turn with Snowballaholic on the inside by a head, Will of Steel on the outside second by seven.... With a quarter to go, the half in 44 and 2 fifths seconds. It’s Will of Steel in front now by one, Snowballaholic second by seven... Into the stretch it’s Will of Steel drawing out now by five, Snowballaholic second by eight... It is ALL Will of Steel.”

Through all of that call of the race, Marylou is screaming “Willow, Willow, Willow...” in my ear. I think I’m deaf. Marylou and I both hopped down the steps. She still had my hand; I shake it loose and run out onto the track. Danni is already on the ground holding Blue’s reins, all smiles; she hands them to me and jumps up to give me a kiss. I have never felt more six-foot-four in my life. I am a big, big man. Holding Blue, I watch Jameson with Willow. Loretta, Maybelle, Lulu, Thomas, and the kids are in the photo. Marylou, Marquart, and several other of the group who have watched every one of Willows works on this track are in there too. Nathan breaks away from the photo to rush out and grab Blue’s reins and says, “Get in the photo man!” So I am in one of the photos as a part of Howard Farm, owner of Will of Steel.

After I leave the circle, I hop back on Blue. Jimmy pulls the saddle off of Willow to stand on the scales with it. Jameson hands me Willow’s reins and I pony her back across the infield. She is not wild-eyed at all. She just has this contented look if I could call it that. She nuzzles Blue’s ears affectionately, I think. Once on the backside I lead her over to the test barn where Jameson takes her again, leads her in and is given the water bucket to offer her and wash tubs with help to wash her down. Nathan has grabbed Blue and motions for me to get off, so I enter the test barn as Nathan rides off with Blue. Danni is there right away and goes in to do some washing too, with Jameson holding Willow. Danni stoops down just to feel the shins—she just can’t help it. She smiles foolishly at me when she rises.

So I walk back to our assigned barn. Nathan is there with Blue unsaddled; Sadie has the bucket for washing Blue.

I said, “Well, kids, what do you think?” as I moved the saddle to where it belonged.

“Howard Farm has one hell of a stable, Ricky! That’s what I think.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You want to help us wash Blue down, Ricky?”

So we did that, picked both stalls, and filled their water buckets, mixed some mash, and filled their hay nets. Then we sat there till we heard another race running, I asked Nathan and Sadie if they didn’t want to go up to the fence to watch. They did.

I was sitting there alone on a bale of straw thinking about fifty years ago and what can happen when you just sit back and watch someone do what they know how to do.

After Willow finally urinated for the test, happy people brought her back to her stall. Blue whinnied and Willow whinnied back. Danni got her rubbing box and went to work at what she does.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

She looked up at me and smiled a most wonderful smile.

When she was finally done and had her all wrapped up in bandages and munching away at her rations, Jameson said. “You two go up dar to da kichen wid your frens. Meun Nathan un Sadie wohn let nuthin happen will we now?”

“Nope. Me and great gramps is on the job.”

“And I’ll make sure they do,” Sadi said, receiving a kiss from Danni.

So we walked on up to the kitchen hand in hand.

Danni said, “Ricky. You made all this possible.”

“Well, Danni,” I said, “you did all the impossible parts.”

It was a little rowdy up at the kitchen. There were hundreds of people in and out of doors. Marylou and Jimmy were cutting a rug. we left very shortly and convinced Jameson that we should load up and go back to Howard Farm where we belong.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Afterward

“Goodbye, Heart.”

“Hello, Marylou” is the way this would start if Ricky had written it, I think. However, most unfortunately, he didn’t write this. I am left to write it—to finish the tale of Danni McGee and Richard T. O’Hare. Yeah , me, Marylou. After the “Hello, Marylou,” his next comment would probably have been “Oh, my fucking God,” as he said so often, whether under his breath or with volume when I had inserted myself into his business. But, unfortunately again, or still, it can’t be helped because Richard T. and Danni M. O’Hare are both dead.

On this somber note there is much left that needs to be said and it is I who, like Ismael swirling in the whirlpool at the end of *Moby Dick*, is left to say it. Note: I purposely wrote “it is I” because that is the way Ricky would have done it. Most people would have used the colloquial “it is me,” but it would be grammatically incorrect; the nominative case is required here. So I’m going to do what I can to finish Ricky’s epic story of Danni McGee in a style and manner that is as close to his as I can do it. And I am very familiar with that style as a close follower of the works of Richard T. O’Hare.

There is actually no afterward required to the story Ricky had to tell of Danni: who the woman was and what she could have, actually had, accomplished. But any story for which there is an audience will have someone in that audience demanding, “Then what happened?” And to this story of the development of Will of Steel, what-happened-next in her case certainly makes sense to ask. Like how many more times did she race, was she undefeated, was she retired and bred to a champion sire, did her offspring win classic races? Etcetera.

She has not raced again even though she was completely sound and there were demands for her to compete against the best of the Breeders’ Cup World Champions and contemporary classic winners, but she

didn't. Danni had purposed that that one race was all that was required to write Willow's name in history; there was no need for her, or more likely her opponent to break down in such an effort. Nor was it intended that she be bred to a champion sire because Danni did not envision that she, herself would be around long enough to inculcate her methods into the tradition-oriented discipline of racehorse training, and without which modification of current methods, any offspring would inevitably be destroyed by the unmitigated speed that her offspring would be capable of achieving. So no, she, like Ruffian in a way, may very probably never have an offspring to race. She and Blue graze together most every day and Jameson tends to her legs and every other aspect of her being, as a champion should be cared for, and if and when anything happens to Jameson, Nathan will do it. So the story of Will Of Steel's achievements is most likely over, at least for now, as Danni would have had it – as one must think she actually intended.

As Jameson would and did say of Danni and Ricky, "Dey wuz two peas a pod; yeza, two peas a pod." Despite an unfortunate fifty-year hiatus, there was never a moment thereafter that they were less than completely unified in heart and soul. Ricky did not always fully understand some of Danni's whims, but it never at any time lessened his love for her. I messed around with their relationship, I guess, but it was not as though any one of us saw any imminent danger in it. It was fun. I think we all came to see our triumvirate as fun, and he saw me as a 'good person.'

But like everyone else they carried baggage with them, and if they weren't actually carrying it, someone would come along to forward it to them. Danni had the wilder lifestyle early on, but it was Ricky whose mild upbringing had turned into a lecher's dreamscape, which I suppose I leveraged to trouble his mind at times. I see that in what he has had to say about the situations where I was involved. I regret some of those—no, I don't really, so scratch that. They were the joy of my life, and I

think it rattled Ricky's cage in ways he liked remembering. He teased himself I think by paranoid delusions he was rational enough to realize were totally unrealistic fatalistic irony with regard to his former affairs wreaking havoc on his golden years. He never at any point really did believe that casual liaisons could turn violent as some sort of karma.

So all of what I have said so far adds nothing to Ricky's story; you knew as much and more from what he had already written, but I needed to sum up that much before moving on to a plot-driven trailer to the story. It certainly does not alter the character of the protagonists; Ricky would not have relished the opportunity—or responsibility—to provide such a plot-driven aspect to his opus.

After the big race, and after Danni rubbed Willow down, detecting no apparent bad effects from the race, she and Ricky briefly joined the crowd in the kitchen, with Jameson insisting on staying in the barn with Willow. Spirits were high, with Jimmy ridiculously happy and me exploiting his happiness, I suppose. It's what I do, I guess, if past is prologue--isn't that how they say it?" I was caught up in the moment and didn't give much notice to anyone but Jimmy and me. But I think she may have been in that crowd. From my memory of that picture Ricky had painted of her, I thought I saw someone who looked just like that. That painting was ultimately how Jennifer was identified.

But having come to the party, they realized it was not their thing, their thing at that moment being to load Willow up and take her home to Howard Farm. It would have been priceless to have Ricky's own words about the exhilaration the two felt on the way home that night, but alas Ricky had one of his lapses in writing after the big race; it was probably 'while the flavor lasted', which was a favorite expression of his.

When I showed up later that next afternoon, Ricky told me that he was quite sure someone had driven out of the parking lot and fell in

right behind their rig and he was sure it was the same car that followed them all the way down 89 and onto New Fox Road, only turning to proceed back toward 89 on the Old Fox Road. I asked him what color the car was, and he said he thought it was a kind of light metallic blue, which again helped to identify the perpetrator. He had thought it had been Jameson and Loretta until it turned to exit on the Old Fox Road, and then shortly Jamesons arrived while they were still getting Willow out of the trailer. Nothing else seemed ominous in the least.

Danni kept Willow on her working schedule and continued to monitor and document any changes in bone temperature and growth. Both seem to have completed the process Danni had envisioned. The neo evolutionary adaptation had occurred, and Willow was a perfectly adapted racehorse, but the one who would most likely never race again. That probably seems like a waste to those who thrill at the sight of great horses competing, but for Danni (and Ricky too I'm quite sure) racing venues have become so exclusively controlled by wealth and gambling that it is detrimental to the horses and horsemen. So the lives of Danni the racehorse trainer and her documenter went on their pleasant way, with me and Jimmy occasionally along for the ride. I showed Jimmy the painting Johnny O had painted of Danni and tried to goad him into registering for art school, but he's so high after having got the ride that one race on Willow, I think it will take a bad injury to get him to retire.

What happened to ruin our pleasant lives is what ruins so many lives in America with incentives for greedy gun manufacturers and gutless politicians. Mass violence occurs daily in this country and although what happened in this particular instance doesn't precisely meet the 'mass shooting' criterion, it is only because Danni and Ricky had decided to leave early after the race or there would have been mass casualties in the kitchen that night with a weapon designed to take out a crowd of people even if you had only wanted to kill one person. Ricky

would willingly have been such a single victim. I know him—well, knew him—and that’s the way he was.

They had been over at the training track to work Willow and were trailering home when the lone gunman, having lined up at right angles to New Fox Road shot through the driver’s left-side window, killing both Ricky and Danni with a single burst of fire. The pickup, with Ricky’s foot off the pedal continued on up the road a few hundred feet before it lost momentum and just stopped. The gunman fled the scene with no witnesses.

Jameson was out hoeing his parsnips when he heard the shots. He jogged up the road and was at the scene in a minute, seeing what had to have been the gunman’s car turn onto 89 heading north. Thomas was there shortly and called 911 immediately, seeing there was nothing else he could do. Jameson later told the police it was a light blue car he had caught a glimpse of as it drove off.

When I contacted the police after Jimmy had heard about it from Jameson and called me, I told them about the car following them home from Keeneland and that I was quite sure the woman who was in Ricky’s painting had been in the kitchen after the big race. Jennifer’s full name was in one of Ricky’s notebooks that he kept as a sort of loose sketch of his activities—the dates and names of the events but with no details that I am guessing he never told Danni either. Wilson was her last name. It was a rental car she rented at the Louisville airport the day before the big race and had not returned in the fortnight since. The vehicle had GPS and they found it up a lonely road in Fort Boonesborough State Park. She had taken an overdose of some over-the-counter medication; there was no suicide note. The AR-15 style rifle that she had purchased the day she arrived in Kentucky was in the back seat.

Nearly a thousand people die from gun violence in Kentucky every year. Danni and Ricky were two of those this year.

I've had a little time to think about things since I first began this. Afterward and before this, Ricky's final book, is published. I'm not really proud of how I've said what had to be said, but I'm sure it had to be said, so this is what will be appended to Richard T. O'Hare's last publication. There is the overwhelming sadness of the final event, but at the higher-level perspective in which we all must die, the fullness of life is much more important than how we die—at least that is the little bit of philosophy I'm applying to this story. Watching my mother die, was devastating. I'm sure Danni and Ricky had their share of family death-bed duties that were awful. Those of us who were the dearest friends left after Danni and Ricky's deaths were shocked and filled with angst and anguish almost beyond what we could bear. But in retrospect neither of them realized a second before they died that they would die and if they had known a month ahead of time, I think they would have spent that month exactly as they did. In the real world we substitute euphemisms like 'they died peacefully in their sleep' for the fairy tale ending of 'they lived happily ever after'. No one lives happily ever after. Think about it; that's for kids. What Danni and Ricky achieved in the fullness of their lives is as close as it comes in the adult world.

Their story addresses many of the problems of horse racing in America, and in how all of us live our lives. It provides suggestions – not complete answers. I am optimistic that at least some of how they addressed problems is being taken to heart. My dad, for example, ordered a pair of shin towels be made for him. He thinks with the newer technology they're even better, with higher resolution, than Danni's were. And they exploit the inverse thermocouple effect Danni hoped to include. Dad had asked Jameson about Danni's, but Jameson insisted that he and Nathan still use them after Willow works—and she does still work. Jimmy goes out to the training track once a week or so

to realize the thrill of all that power under him. Blue Kentucky Moon is going to need those towels before long. He's a strapping yearling now, full of heart and I think Nathan and Jameson are going to apply Danni O'Hare's neo-evolutionary training thing with Moon the way Danni would have, and I am betting the farm on Blue Kentucky Moon already.

I've been busy doing radiology work for my dad and Jameson (I really think it's for Nathan; that kid's on a mission). Occasionally I've done Willow and there are no changes there. I'm guessing Howard Farm is about to join the big leagues; that's Thomas's intent. The future is bright.

But still it's with great sadness I close this book.

“Goodbye, Heart.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: After Afterwords

One must suppose that every author begins her next volume, having overcome a period of writer's block. Even though this is my first, after having written only the Afterword to Richard T. O'Hare's final volume, it is with considerable apprehension that I take on this responsibility of a sequel on my own. I do it primarily because there is a story needing to be told and I am not aware of anyone more qualified to tell it. This must seem presumptuous to the reader. I do understand that.

However, I have discussed this issue of whether Ricky's truncated story should remain the finale of what he set out to document and if not, then who should proceed. Discussions involved all the Jameson family members who co-habited Howard Farm, principals in the communities at training tracks in Estill County as well as at Keeneland, and also the lawyer dealing with the O'Hare inheritance and Roberta Nelson who was major in the decision. All these individuals were of one mind that if a continuing story was to be told at all, then it was I who must tell it.

For Danni's innovative approach to thoroughbred racehorse training to make a substantive difference in the world, that story definitely needs to be continued to scientifically validate her conclusions in application to more than one horse. But with Ricky's expertise as a novelist it was much more than a tale of two horses, it was about the people who love and care for those horses and each other. So in addition to gaping holes in a scientific conclusion at the end of *The Ruffian Syndrome*, there is so much left to be said about those of us left in the penumbra of horse racing and Howard Farm that merits elaboration. There! That may be a bit self-centered and melodramatic. I know, but I'm new at this. I will get better. Now, enough with the excuses.

After Danni and Ricky's so untimely demise, there is so much left to say; evolving sagas continue absent even a major protagonist. New ones do arise, along with inevitable antagonists; the meaningful stories

continue to unfold and get told; that is the way it has always been, how it is with this story, and how one must suppose it will be until the end of recorded history. There are human achievements that outlive those who first accomplish them. The training regimen that Danni O'Hare put in place with Will Of Steel qualifies for that kind of praise. My father is one who swears by the techniques and technologies she developed.

We were all witness to the amazing achievement of the three-year-old filly Will Of Steel, trained by Danni O'Hare and owned by Howard Farm, principally the O'Hares themselves. One single race established her, for those of us who witnessed it, as the finest three-year-old filly of her generation. We are convinced, that she belongs up near Ruffian as one of the all-time greatest. One race does not prove that definitively, but for those of us aware of what preceded that race, we are convinced. Willow is still around—alive and well, still in condition and with fitness maintained by the remaining principals of Howard Farm. At least there is a possibility that one day a larger audience will witness her greatness for themselves.

So that's the status of the interrupted but continuing story of Danni McGee begun so masterfully by Richard under the title of *The Ruffian Syndrome*. I am committed to a complete telling of the evolving story. I believe in it. Each time I travel down to Estill county to accompany Jimmy or on my own on days when Willow works at the training track, I end up talking with Jameson and Nathan, if he isn't in school. Then I follow them home to spend a little time on the farm. We usually have lunch and interact with the entire family. I am starting to feel like part of that family.

This is becoming a story of Howard Farm. But we must start at the cataclysmic event that is the brutal beginning of *the rest of the story*.

When the school bus was forced by the sheriff's officers to back out of New Fox Road after having turned off from Highway 89 on Sadie's

way home from school, she did see the ambulance and police cars next to Willow's horse trailer. The rear of the trailer was open; Willow had already been led back to the farm by Sadie's great grandfather, but she didn't know that. She could see the pickup up ahead of the trailer; her father was standing by it. Some person's body was being taken out of the pickup covered in blood and then covered by a sheet. By then the bus had been turned around and was back out on 89 heading south the short distance to Old Fox Road and on down to the farm where the old road merges at its far end with New Fox Road that then continues down to the river. The bus turned around to proceed back up Old Fox Road. After Sadie jumped down from the bottom step, she stretched her neck around the bus to peer down New Fox Road. Then she noticed her great grandpa walking Willow in the yard. Her brother Nathan broke away from him to rush over to where she stood as the bus headed back up Old Fox Road.

"It's okay," Nathan said, but he was crying. "It's okay. Willow's okay."

"Where's Auntie Danni? Where is she? Where's Uncle Richard?"

"Willow's fine," Nathan insisted. "Willow's fine."

"Where is Auntie Dani!" Sadie screamed now. "Where are they, Nathan? Are they okay?"

Nathan didn't answer, clutching his little sister in his arms tightly now. "It's not good, Sadie. It's not good."

Sadie's mother Lulu came running out of the O'Hare's house where Sadie's father Thomas had been working on the new bedroom earlier—but he was up the road with the policemen now. "What is it, Nathan?" Lulu asked. "How bad?"

"Awful, Mama. Awful."

"Maybelle and Loretta, Sadie's grandmother and great grandmother came from the older house stopping by Jameson who kept methodically

walking Willow but spoke a few words to them before they broke away and ran to where Lulu and the children were sobbing.

Nathan ran out to the stable then to be with Jameson as he began to rub Willow's legs as always on the days when she had worked.

"She alright, grandpa?" he asked sobbing.

"She be fine," Jameson assured him. "We got us one hella job now Nathan. You gotsa grow up fass now boy."

"I will grampa. I will."

Sadie had left the women, running after Nathan; she was standing watching their interaction now. "Me too, grandpa," she said between sobs.

Jameson rose then and stepped over to Sadie. "Oh, Chile, you gotsa be a Chile; we need us this Chile roun here, Sadie. We needs a young 'un, Honey. You goin a be our joy. Dat yur job—big, big job."

I'd been thinking the whole thing through ever since Jimmy called to tell me what he knew from having stopped at the scene and learning as much as he could before being turned away. I had hopped in my car immediately and remembered having seen Jennifer at the celebration after Willow's race at Keeneland. It was easy to identify her as the woman Ricky had painted. All those times Ricky laughed at alternative modes of his death at the hands of his previous female encounters came back to me. Once, even in reference to my boxcutter, he would laugh about one of his former one-night stands who had thought it had been forever, coming after him with an AR-47. He had a way of relating things that high-lighted the humor. But as I drove, I figured this whole thing out; I was virtually certain that Jennifer had taken her revenge.

There were a bunch of cop cars leaving the taped off New Fox Road exit as I drove slowly past. I could see the forensics crew down fifty yards or so combing the area and assessing tire tracks. I drove on to Old Fox Road and on down to Howard Farm.

Thomas had run out of the O'Hare house where he'd been working on the new bedroom when he heard the shots and saw Jameson running up the road and ran after him. Seeing the fatalities as beyond anyone's help, he called 911. Then he went directly over to drop the tailgate on the trailer so Jameson could back Willow out onto the road and thence lead her on back down to the farm. They had exchanged the very few words that were necessary. Thomas waited for the aid vehicles and remained there to help the EMTs and did not return to the farm for an hour or so. Finally he drove the pickup back into the yard and just left it parked with the trailer still hooked up. He stepped out and headed over to where the women were gathered.

One of the sheriff's deputies followed the pickup and trailer back to the farm. Since it had been Thomas at the scene when the sheriff and his officers arrived, he had immediately become the prime suspect. The deputy had drawn his gun as soon as Thomas stepped out of the vehicle.

"Officer," Thomas said with his hands in the air, "My best friends have just been murdered. I got no guns; I never have; I am not violent; I am not mean; could we maybe just go on into the O'Hare house here with my family and discuss this horrible thing?"

The officer still had his hand on his weapon as the Sheriff himself drove in and hurriedly jumped out of his vehicle yelling, "What the hell are you doin, Denny?"

"I'm just doing my job, Sir."

"No, you're fucking not. Put that gun away; have you not learned a God damned thing? Get your ass back to the office and get working on that incident report."

I had driven in right after the sheriff, so that's when I showed up on the scene, having overheard that entire interaction. I recognized the sheriff from somewhere—a fundraising event or something.

"Sheriff," I interjected, "I think I have some relevant information."

“And you are?” the sheriff asked.

“Marylou Johnson, Sheriff.” I proffered my hand. “I think we’ve met.”

He took it. “Yes?”

“I was best friends with Danni and Ricky,” I had tears in my eyes at this point and could hardly keep it together. “And I’m certain I know who did this awful thing”

“Okay...” he responded expectantly. “Who?”

“It’ll take a little explanation,” I blurted, “but there’s a picture of the person in the house here.”

I’m sure that at that point I was climbing his short list of suspects, but he pointed to the house and motioned for Thomas to lead us to the door. When we entered, the three women were huddled together in the kitchen sobbing. Loretta broke away, handing Jenni (Ricky’s dog) off to Lulu, and came to throw her arms around me. We embraced while the Sheriff eyed his surroundings. Thomas showed the officer what he had been doing in the new bedroom when he had heard the shots and had seen Jameson through the window as he had headed to where the pickup had finally stopped. He then showed the sheriff the various other rooms of the house. They were in Danni and Ricky’s bedroom when I rejoined them. They were both looking in amazement at the painting that Johnny O had made of Danni in the nude.

“That’s Danni,” I said as I went to find the image of Jennifer.

It was still where Danni had placed it the night Ricky had made a fuss about her having showed it to me. I pulled it out and showed it to the sheriff. I could tell he was appalled.

“Sheriff,” I defended, “these were very private paintings. “This one was painted by Ricky of a previous relationship a long time ago. This woman’s name is Jennifer, but I don’t happen to know her last name. But this woman was there the night of the celebration after Willow’s win.” I’m quite sure the sheriff had also been there that night.

He was heeding my conversation now. “Well, let’s take this on down to the station and have a facial recognition image made from this. Are there any other photos of her in here?”

“I’m sure there aren’t,” I responded. “But you should know that Ricky told me that a metallic blue car followed them all the way home that night after the race and then hurried away back up Old Fox Road when they saw someone else was coming down the new road.”

Jameson was standing there with us now. “Dat wuss meun Lohretta cummin home. I did see da car dat nite, an when I run up to da traila juss now, dere wus a blue car a squeallin’ outta dere.”

The Sheriff looked over at me. “You don’t know this woman’s last name, huh? Do you think it might be available anywhere in the house here?”

“Well Ricky’s office is just around here,” and I led him into the next room.

Lulu came over then to Thomas sobbing. “He pulled a gun on you Darlin. He pulled a gun.”

“Just doin his job. You know he has to do that.”

“No, no, he don’t”

The sheriff had overheard their conversation and broke away from me in the office to address Tomas and Lulu: “You are correct, Ma’am. The officer was totally in the wrong. I’ll address that with him. I’m truly sorry about that, Thomas; that isn’t how we do our business here. You and your family have my sincerest sympathy and apology for my officer’s behavior. But right now, we need to find out who did this,” and he was back with me in the office.

“Thanks Sheriff,” I said.

“Just doing my job,” he said, nonplussed. “Do you think Richard might have had a log or diary of some sort hidden away in this office somewhere?”

“It’s worth a look, but I think that image that Danni showed me once—he would have destroyed it if she hadn’t hidden it away again—was all he seemed to have retained of any previous relationship.”

“You never know though.”

“He was so devoted to Danni that none of his past mattered to him—even his novel writing was bygone history.”

The sheriff continued rifling through the drawers of Ricky’s desk and found a small leather-bound notebook with a few cursory notes: The dates of his marriage and divorce to and from an Amanda Heller, publication dates and titles of novels, followed by women’s names, some first names only but some with a last name included. Following the publication of the novel *Sometimes A Rose Is Not A Rose* was the name Jennifer Wilson.

“Got it!” he emoted. “I think you may have solved this thing for us. Would you please follow me down to the office in Irvine to make your statement. I’ll get on the horn, and we’ll hunt down this here Jennifer Wilson and see what she has to say. She doesn’t strike me as someone who’d be handy with an AR-47, but who knows these days.”

“Sheriff, it sounds awful, but I recall Ricky saying things like, ‘God, I was afraid that might be one of my exes with an AR-47. It wasn’t funny, but the way he used to say it was funny, and you know what?’”

“What?”

“I don’t doubt if he was saying that when he was in the relationship with Jennifer and the fact that he later named a dog after her just might mean something.”

“I’ll bet you’re right. Again. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

So I followed him on down to the courthouse where his office is located and wrote up what I had observed while he got his network involved in tracking down Jennifer Wilson.

His name was John; he and I saw each other on several occasions afterward, with me always having insisted that the painting and diary

belong to me unless someone having a more legitimate claim contests it. He always teased that Denny did not want to let the painting go.

“Denny be damned.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: Restoring Normality

After filing my observations with the sheriff on that fateful day, I drove back to the farm as much to begin closure for myself, but even more to help them as well as myself in the grieving process. That sounds like so much bull shit, but it isn't. It is a process with phases and the whole bit. I know.

Thomas was still comforting Lulu, who it had seemed to me had had much less contact with Danni and Ricky than anyone else in the family. But grief is grief however we handle it. Thomas was as soft and gentle with Lulu as I could imagine any good husband being. He had his own issues, of course, but he was concentrating on hers.

Anyway... Loretta called me aside to tell me about the meetings there had been between the entire Jameson family and the O'Hares with regard to what would happen with the farm if anything happened to them. I was amazed that there had been that much forethought put into what would have had to be considered a very remote possibility of what had just transpired.

"Danni and Ricky set it all up for our family to run the farm without interruption."

"Is that all documented?"

"It is," she stated. "Let me show you."

Jameson came over to join the conversation. "What you doon?"

"I'm asking Marylou for advice on the legal things, Jimmy."

"Good. Ricky put 'em midle drawr in dar," he pointed to Ricky's office. We followed him. He recovered the thick sheaf of papers that the sheriff had glanced at and returned to the drawer.

"Is here."

Loretta took the papers. “Yes, thanks Jimmy.” Then addressing me, “Do we need a lawyer for this, Marylou?”

I glanced at the papers. “You will. I assume you have your own copy too.”

“Yessum,” Jimmy confirmed.

“Is there a local lawyer that drew these up?”

“No. Ricky had somebody in Washington, State do the paperwork. Her name is...” she thumbed through the pages to near the end, “here.”

I saw the name and thought it might have been a woman’s name I had just seen in the diary I had let the sheriff take.

“I’m sure this is legally sound and that you all are familiar with the terms. Right?”

“Right,” both Jimmy and Loretta confirmed.

“Because of this, I’m sure there are no problems with going ahead as stated in this document. I assume Willow and the farm all belong to you and your family now free and clear.”

“Sad as tis, it do,” Jameson said.

“Okay, if it was that woman who killed them, there is no danger to you or your family, so I think you should just go on with your lives as normally as you can.”

“It’ll be fine to do that?”

“I’m no expert, but I think I would lock up the new house until the murder case is solved. The officials might need to search for more leads. After the case is solved, then you can rearrange your situation.”

“Will you help us get a honest lawyer then, Marylou?”

“I will. Call me at any time. I’ll come down if ever you need me.”

As I stepped toward the door, I noticed that Lulu was even more hysterical than she had been when I had entered. Loretta noticed my concern and nodded toward the door. It wasn’t immediately clear what she intended other than me and the door. As I stepped out, she joined me, closing the door behind her.

“She’ll be okay,” Loretta said as what I sensed to be an introduction to an explanation of Lulu’s behavior. “You see, she’s in terror of police because her father was shot by a policeman down in Tennessee.”

“Oh,” it seemed clear to me now.

“You see, Marylou, her father and our Daniel were friends, and they got into some mischief—nothing the Good Lord wouldn’t forgive; they were good timers.”

“Was Daniel...?”

“Yes; yes, he was. You see, they were out high ridin’ one night when they should have been in bed sleepin’ and got pulled over. We have no idea what actually happened, Marylou, but Alvin—Lulu’s father was shot dead just sittin’ in the car. We think Daniel must have taken exception and attacked the police officer—that’s what they reported. So they beat him to death with their clubs.”

“Oh my God, Loretta. I am so sorry.”

“Long time ago now.” There were tears in Loretta’s eyes but no other emotional signs as she continued, “Lulu was a baby. She and Thomas grew up together.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Neither of those police officers were ever held responsible; we did try to get some clarity and legal reparation but without success. Just cost us money and trouble.”

“So you have reason to suspect the legal system may not deal fairly with you.”

“We do. And you know, Marylou. It was so hard on Jimmy. He had tried to tell Daniel that black men have to talk like Jimmy does if they don’t want to be mistreated. My Jimmy is so smart, and he tries so hard to act dumb; Daniel wouldn’t have any of it. It was so hard on my Jimmy.”

She was sobbing now; I clutched her in my arms sobbing with her.

When I left the farm, I returned to Irvine to look at that diary to see whether the lawyer happened to be in there. As I walked into the office unannounced Denny was prancing around with the painting of Jennifer being held in both his hands as though he were dancing with her live.

“You don’t know how to keep your hands off of things, do you?”

“Sorry Ma’am, I was just putting it away.”

“Okay. Where’d you put the diary?”

“Right here Ma’am.” He placed it on the counter between us. I scanned through it to the entry of the Sometimes A Rose Isn’t A Rose novel, after which there was just one woman named: Jennifer Wilson. On the next page was the novel, The Day Jack Died; the woman on that page was Roberta Nelson. Voila! And this one had a phone number.

Leaving Irvine to drive up beyond Paris, which is how I often refer to my place of residence up in Cynthiana, I clicked on the number I had just put on my iPhone.

“This is Roberta, how can I help you.”

“We have...” I started to sob. I don’t know why; I just did

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, I’m just... leaving Howard Farm... Ricky’s dead, Roberta; he’s been killed.”

“What? Who is this?”

“Marylou Johnson, Danni and Ricky’s friend.”

“How can that be? I spoke with them not very long ago; everything was going great.”

“I know. I know, that’s why I’m calling. Jamesons may need your help. Danni and Ricky were killed this morning.”

There was a gasp and a long pause at the other end; I heard sobbing that was followed by, “How?”

“They were shot. There is a suspect that hasn’t been apprehended yet but has been identified.”

“How awful. I love those people... loved.” A pause that somehow informed me there was more after which she asked, “Was it a woman?”

“I know. I thought that you would care, but I can’t disclose police information.”

“Well... what is happening now... with the family?”

“We’re in turmoil here. I imagine law enforcement may contact you. I just wanted to let you know. Loretta Jameson showed me your name on the earlier agreement with Danni and Ricky that you had put together for them. I imagine the terms of that agreement will become relevant very shortly. Jameson’s have been seriously mistreated by the law before. Let’s not let that happen this time.”

“Oh, my goodness... That was such a good thing Danni and Ricky were doing. Do you happen to know a good lawyer there.”

“Yes, it was a very good thing. I’ll make sure they have good representation. I’ll let you go for now. Call me any time.”

As I drove on in silence, I thought of Roberta as one of the women Ricky came to know because of his books. His book title *Sometimes A Rose Isn’t A Rose* seems to have applied to Jennifer, but *The Day Jack Died* didn’t, and certainly doesn’t, apply to Roberta. I wondered though why she had asked whether the suspect was a woman. I noted that fact and purposed to ask her some day when the dust has settled.

Then I began thinking of legal experts I knew who could be relied upon to help Jamesons secure Danni and Ricky’s intent on their behalf. My dad trained for a couple of different lawyers. Maryanne and I had hit it off well. I decided I would contact her when the time came.

It was only a couple days before the Estill County sheriff called to tell me he had solved the case. It would be on the TV evening news. Would I like to meet for a late lunch, and he’d fill me in personally, so I’d know the extent to which I had helped solve this case. Would I like to be included in the news coverage or remain an anonymous witness? I

opted for the latter but accepted the lunch. I suggested that John—the sheriff—include the older Jamesons, which he did. In retrospect, I'm not sure whether or not he had actually intended something a little more intimate in his and my regard but that didn't happen. In any case, it was at that lunch that I learned the details that I subsequently revealed in the Afterword of Ricky's account of his and Danni's life with details of the Jennifer Wilson suicide that closed out the murder case.

John brought both Danni and Ricky's laptops and iPhones that he had seized earlier, saying that there wasn't anything of relevance to the case on any of the devices as far as they could tell. They couldn't even break Ricky's password. Jamesons then opted to take Danni's as most relevant to assisting Nathan in deciphering Danni's approach and intent for the horses. They said I might as well take Ricky's. So I did.

After John left the table of the Backstreet Grub to coordinate with the press back at the courthouse, Loretta asked whether it might be time to get the legalities taken care of. I texted Maryanne right then, telling her that Loretta would soon be in touch. Maryanne called back directly; I put my iPhone on speaker, introducing her to Loretta and Jameson. It was Loretta who did most of the talking on the call; she insisted that a meeting including every member of the Jameson family as well as me be present at an official reading of the will, and would it be possible to have that meeting at the Howard farm? Maryanne agreed.

Maryanne set that up for a very few days later, after having done all the preliminaries before accompanying me down from Cincinnati where I picked her up at the airport. She had verified that there were no direct family members or descendants of either of the O'Hares and that all their joint financial accounts and properties were to be transferred to 'Jamesons', a term therein referring to all the several families including two Taylor families, all administered by James and Loretta Jameson.

So, following the deaths of Danni and Ricky, Thomas Taylor—the Jamesons' grandson—and his wife Lulu moved into what they now call the O'Hare house, their ten-year-old daughter Sadie took over Ricky's former office as her bedroom. Thomas had already started on building an extra bedroom that I think Danni had wanted primarily to make it easier when I stayed over. He had redoubled his efforts on that project, but in the meantime their son Nathan was using the second bedroom in Loretta and Jameson's old house. Their widowed daughter Maybelle is now using another bedroom in that house that Thomas had remodeled earlier in the summer.

Both the houses now have cheerful great grandchildren running in and out regularly. Thomas has shown all the motivations and ambition of Jameson himself, but without the horsey aspect and broken English. He has major aspirations for the farm as a top-class horse breeding and racing operation, with white rail fences and a three-quarter mile training track Jameson and Nathan had insisted on, projects that will be initiated after the buildings have all been modernized. That's his vision—his personal dream for the farm. All of the various capabilities and dreams of four generations of Jameson's family are being focused on the future of Howard Farm.

The beautiful portrait of Danni painted by Johnny O'Neill that hung in Ricky's office now hangs in the living room of the O'Hare house on the same wall as an enlarged win photo of Willow and several other of the paintings Johnny had done of horses Danni had tried to save with surgery as a veterinarian. The nude image of her that had hung in the O'Hare's bedroom now hangs in the main room in my house up in Cynthia north of Paris. It might soon hang alongside the nude image that Ricky had painted of Jennifer all so long ago although explanations would get awkward in its regard. I don't know exactly what to do with it. But I will requisition it from the sheriff if and when the paperwork of

their enquiry is finally completed. I think some of the officers will be reticent to let it go.

I had wanted Jimmy to attempt the same honor of painting me in the role that Ricky established as femella homo sapiens. His horse sketches are very well done and I'm confident that if he had put forth the effort without diverting it to instant gratification, he could maybe have created a masterpiece with me as the model—I'm sort of teasing. I've lost hope that he would enroll in art school since he has become quite enamored with his new role as a major jockey. His services are in high demand. I sense our having drifted apart is now complete.

Jameson has taken over as the principal among the mutual owners of Howard Farm—now all members of his immediate family. But he has committed himself personally to the care of Willow, including maintaining the training regimen established by Danni. I helped him with it a little as far as her methods in using apps on an iPhone to view the data generated from the shin towel thermocouple temperature plots superimposed on the x-ray data images that I generate as a part of my radiology support. He was totally unfamiliar with all of the technical aspects of that but has caught on amazingly quickly. That is primarily because of his great grandson Nathan who has caught every detail and relayed the information to Jameson.

They have been a delightful pair for me to work with; together they tapped into my knowledge of radiology as well as racehorse training. Jameson has spent his life working with Danni's family in training thoroughbreds also. The expertise I had to offer came primarily from my having had so many conversations over the last few months with the O'Hares. Together we had perfected and amply documented Danni's innovative approach. I've learned from my father that he is exploring ramifications of the technological approach and its application.

Willow has not yet raced again although she was completely sound after her decisive victory in the Breeders' Cup for Kentucky bred three-

year-old fillies. There were demands for her to compete against all of the best fillies in the world that would run in the Breeders' Cup World Championships, but she didn't. Danni had purposed that one race was all that would be required to write Willow's name in history; there was no need for her, or more likely an opponent to break down in such an effort as had happened to Ruffian. It goes without saying that Ricky and I conspired to persuade her otherwise. Who knows whether we would have been successful in that endeavor, but as things transpired that possibility was unthinkable so soon after the tragedy. The filly Snowballaholic who was the runner up in Willow's decisive win acquitted herself well on the world stage, etching Will of Steel's name ever closer to what many of us had considered to be the greatest filly of all time, Ruffian.

Willow and Blue graze together most every day when she has not been worked. Jameson tends to her legs and every other aspect of her being as a true champion should be cared for. If, or when, anything happens to an aging Jameson, Nathan will do it. He is eager and fully capable. So the story of Will Of Steel's achievements, although now paused indefinitely as Danni would have insisted, is by no means at an end. It is a real possibility that she may race again. It is already a new year and full of promise.

Jimmy used to drive on down to the training track once every week or so to realize the thrill of all that power under him. It always excited me when he told me about it and updated me on activities at Howard Farm. Often, I had taken the opportunity of accompanying him down into Estill County on these occasions, but Jimmy seems to have moved on to bigger things in his career. I don't exactly know the status of our once budding relationship but I'm pretty sure it's over.

Blue Kentucky Moon is going to need Danni's towels before long. He is a strapping yearling now, full of heart and I think that Nathan and Jameson are going to apply the Danni O'Hare neo-evolutionary training

thing with Moon the way Danni would have. Now with a head start on the neo-evolutionary environment of running as the gradually increased regimen Danni would have insisted on, with temperature and radiology monitoring to avoid injury. I am betting the farm on my Blue Kentucky Moon already. He had arrived within days of Willow's victory to the added enthusiasm of the entire farm. I wish Ricky had written of that enthusiasm and Danni's ideas for his development, but he didn't, so it is Nathan who has filled in a lot of that gap. He told me about Danni's going over Moon's pedigree with him explaining the significance of all those crosses of Bold Ruler. She also told him what she intended to be his 'pre-school' racehorse training program. Nathan does know how to listen. He's a smart kid.

I've been busy doing radiology work for my dad and Howard Farm. It's really Nathan; that kid's on a mission. Occasionally I do Willow's legs but there are no changes there. We're now putting together an in-depth profile of cannon, knee, and pastern bone developments on Blue Kentucky Moon. Nathan will accelerate his training as soon as it is safe and no sooner but I'm guessing he will be the fittest and soundest two-year-old at any track once he gets into training.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Roberta's Revelations

I do not like loose ends and get obsessed with tying them together. I guess that's who I am. Her having asked me if it had been a woman upon my telling Roberta about the murder of Danni and Ricky has haunted me ever since. At the time I had purposed to ask her about it when the investigation was concluded. So as I drove home from the lunch with Jamesons and John, I called Roberta. She answered on the second ring and after the usual 'I'm okay, you're okay' conversation I decided to ask her directly.

"Why did you ask me whether it had been a woman who shot Danni and Ricky?"

"Oh, Marylou," she said softly, and I knew I had struck some tender spot deep within her. "I didn't mean to put my finger on the scale."

I kept my voice level, to avoid upsetting her further. I could hear a quiver in her breath. "Look; your comment didn't affect the case in any way. I didn't relay it to anyone, but I've wondered why you thought it might have been a woman—just a personal thing. You don't owe me or anyone an explanation. The only reason I called is because the sheriff has closed the case today with Jennifer Wilson identified as having committed the crime and subsequently committing suicide. So when I recalled you having asked me whether it had been a woman, I wondered why that likelihood had suggested itself to you. And... in case you haven't guessed, I loved Ricky myself and it didn't seem to me like he would ever have abused any woman to so enrage her that she would kill people for it. Did you have a different experience with Ricky following publication of his novel *The Day Jack Died*?"

After a sobbing delay, the heaviness in her tone still hung between us, “Ricky would not have abused anyone, Marylou. Is there someplace we could meet privately even for just a few hours to discuss this? I can afford to fly there if that’s convenient. Would you be okay with that?”

“Sure,” I said, “If you fly into Cincinnati or Louisville, I will pick you up. Or I could fly there. You see, I embarrassed myself in front of Ricky and Danni, and it’s hard for me to wrap my head around it. This conversation is one I need too, Roberta, and it would be most enjoyable to meet you in person.”

“Yours sounds like a very interesting but traumatic experience, but I’m guessing it didn’t end up as a headline in a newspaper like mine.”

“No, thank god. When can we meet?”

“Would it be okay if I try to arrange the red-eye flight for tonight?”

“Just text me the schedule and I’ll be there. For your information, Maryanne plans to finalize the will in just a few days at Howard Farm.”

“Oh, good. Let me arrange a flight and get back to you.”

I drove on toward home, but before I got very far my phone rang. It was Roberta.

“I’ll catch the red-eye flights that get me into Cincinnati at 7:30 AM; is that too ridiculous. If you give me your address, I’ll rent a car and drive down.”

“No, no. I’ll be there. Plan on spending some time while you’re here. You’ll enjoy visiting Howard Farm.”

“Oh, thanks, and yes, I would. I’ll see how much time I can get without losing my job. I’ll text my flight scenario. See you in the morning.” And that was that.

I decided to stop by my Dad’s to see how he was doing and maybe go out for dinner before going home. I was quite surprised to encounter both my dad and Maryanne in bathrobes having a late brunch. That weirded me out a little; but I like them both a lot, so what can you say. I didn’t stay long, proceeded on to Cynthia, and opened a can of chili

for supper later. Then I messed around trying a few birth dates and name inversion combinations, concluding that I would probably never crack Ricky's password; it was a bitch.

After my Alexa alarm woke me up, I called the airport to determine whether Roberta's flight was on time. It was delayed and wouldn't get in till after nine. That was good—for me at least; it meant a much more leisurely trip north to meet up with a friend I hadn't previously met in person. I was assuming she would spend a night here at least, maybe more. I had made vague plans during sleepless intervals, but probably the first day would be dedicated to what had to be discussed in private. Women don't like confessing their vulnerability to charming men, but from my perspective there aren't any good reasons for that. A man's vulnerability to the beauty and charm of a woman is considered an integral aspect of his charm. I do feel a sense of gullibility, nonetheless.

Seeing someone in person with whom you've become 'friends' on social media is a strange but usually delightful experience I've found. Roberta was no exception; she was stunningly beautiful—tall and graceful, a quiet kind of beauty that took me by surprise. But her eyes, those soft light blue eyes, were heavy with unresolved issues.

“How was your flight? Not too harrowing I hope.”

“No, not really, although there was more turbulence than I enjoy before we landed at O'Hare.”

“The windy city.”

“Yes, but a little more than usual. Enough to delay our take off, I think. I hope you didn't have to wait all that time.”

“Oh, no. I called first thing and took my time getting here. Do you need anything before we head toward Paris?”

“No. Paris. How exciting,” she laughed.

“Well,” I laughed too. “Paris, Kaintuck ain't got no Eiffel Tower, Ma chère. Besides which, I live a ways north of that tiny metropolis in Cynthiana.”

“Cynthiana. That sounds even nicer, *Ma chère*”

When we arrived at my castle, I noted that her suitcase was large and quite heavy as I lifted it out of the back to roll on up to the house. “You can stay a while I take it from the heft of your bag.”

“Yes. Is that okay?”

“Wonderful.”

We walked into my high-ceilinged living area; the nude painting of Danni by Johnny O’Neill was prominently displayed above my couch, dominating the room. Roberta’s gaze was drawn immediately to the painting. She stopped mid step in front of it—the first person to ever see it now that it is in my possession. I was a bit apprehensive.

“That’s her; that’s Danni, isn’t it?”

I nodded, unsure what to say.

She took a step closer, reaching out as if to touch the canvas. “It’s incredible,” she whispered. “I never met her in person, but it’s exactly how I imagined her.”

The raw emotion in her voice surprised me, and without thinking, I moved to her. We hugged—tentatively at first, but soon it was as though all the grief and confusion we’d been holding in found a safe place to land. It was intimate in the truest sense. We held on to each other tightly, sobbing quietly together. I’m no lesbian and I don’t think either of us is bisexual, nonetheless, that embrace became what some homophobes would describe as a lesbian encounter, of which neither of us is ashamed; we love each other and ourselves more for not denying the splendor of that moment—well, okay, more than a moment. That was the way our time together began.

When we finally pulled ourselves apart, I wiped my eyes, my words came slowly. “I think we both needed that,” I said.

Roberta nodded, gazing at Danni’s portrait again, she turned to kiss me a last time before continuing in her hushed voice. “I didn’t realize

how desperately I needed this exchange, Marylou. There's so much I need to tell you."

"Come on then," I guided her to one of my overstuffed chairs. "You must be exhausted; let's sit. We have all the time there is."

Then for a little while neither of us spoke a word. Finally, Roberta began, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I had become obsessed with Richard's work. I read everything he wrote. So after *The Day Jack Died* was published, I followed all the interviews. When they announced a book signing in Seattle, I just had to go. I drove over from Spokane and waited in the bookstore for hours, jittery with nerves. I listened to him read a short passage from his book that was exhilarating to me. It was the passage where Jack is telling Anne goodbye. I teared up and was still a bit teary-eyed when I got to the front of the line to have him sign my book. When I finally stood right there in front of him, I blurted out how much I loved his books, and he smiled at me, Marylou. Like... he really smiled. He signed my book and then... he grabbed my hand and gently turned it over to write on my wrist with his pen, 'Call me,' and this number." She held out her wrist to me and I saw a permanent reminder tattooed there. "His touch was magic."

But of course that magic wasn't what ended up on the six O'clock News and as the headlines of newspaper articles, so I asked, "What happened next?"

Roberta stared off into the painting of Danni, her fingers absently brushing her tattoo. "I waited until the bookstore closed, but I did call, and he answered with that easy-going manner of his. He asked if I had had supper and when I told him that I had, he didn't hustle me. He asked if I'd like to have lunch the next day. I said I would. Then he asked me if I lived in Seattle or was somewhere else more convenient. I didn't want to tell him I had come all the way from Spokane, so I told him Seattle was fine." She clenched her teeth and then continued.

“‘The Marriot serves a good lunch,’ he said, so that’s where we had our lunch the next day and I went up to his room afterward. It’s a little embarrassing,” Roberta said, “but it was exactly what I had hoped for, Marylou. It was the most wonderful experience; I’m not able to explain it—even to myself. The excitement, the gentleness of that man. It was the perfect romantic experience.” She motioned to the wall opposite, staring at Danni as she wistfully added, “That wonderful woman won the honor of that gentle touch longer than any woman ever had.” She wriggled down into the cushions, and I found myself reaching toward Danni too, my fingers fully extended. Roberta looked over at me then and said, “He had a way of making you feel special.”

“He did alright. I wish I had a directly analogous experience, but mine was just me making a fool of myself with his kindly behavior making it not quite so bad. You see, he and Danni,” I was staring at Danni now instead of looking at Roberta, “they were the real thing and, when Danni slept by Willow’s stall after Willow’s first work at the Keeneland track...” I stopped speaking because I was ashamed, putting a closed fist to my mouth, I looked over at Roberta. There was genuine empathy in her gaze.

“Yes?” she whispered expectantly.

“Well, I went over to the hotel where Ricky was going to spend the night and rented a room just down the hall from his.” I wanted to quit what I was saying and listen to more of Roberta’s intense experience; I could tell by her expression that thoughts were anxious to be expressed, but I crashed on. “I waited till I knew Ricky would be in bed; believe me Roberta, I know how creepy and weird it must seem. And I can’t explain why I would do such a thing. I stripped down and put on one of those hotel robes and went down and knocked at his door. I think he had actually been asleep when I knocked.”

Roberta’s empathy had turned to scorn. A frown with disapproval appeared as wrinkles on her forehead, in how she leaned forward in her

chair. Her eyes were harsh as I continued, but by the time I completed describing my humiliating scene, her empathy returned. We both were crying now. She came over to my chair and we held each other. I had had no idea the depth of humiliation I would feel in having to describe what I had done. We sat there, both of us squeezed into one chair.

Finally the awkwardness struck me, and I asked, “Don’t you think maybe we should have a bite to eat?” We laughed at our predicaments through tears. I sliced some cheese, and she cut slices of bread.

“I liked sitting snuggled up in the same chair,” she said. “I’ll need that kind of close support when I tell you the rest of my story. It is truly awful, Marylou.”

“It helps, doesn’t it? Holding each other.”

So we snuggled in together and she began again to describe what had ended up on the six o’clock news in Seattle.

“Up in his room in the Marriot we had made love all afternoon and night and were sleeping when there came a loud knock on the door. A completely naked woman was out there screaming at the top of her lungs, ‘Let me in you two-timing bastard! Let me in there! I know there’s another woman in there with you, Richard’ and right away there were other voices of the hotel guests all along the length of the hallway who had come out into the hall, angry at being awoken so early, or just to watch. There was a flood of obscene curses, the woman screaming vile obscenities back at them and denouncing Ricky O’Hare as a two-timing pervert.”

I was aghast, thinking about the similarity to what I had done.

Roberta’s eyes were pools of tears, with her in there somewhere drowning in memories. “Someone must have called the police,” she said, “but before they arrived, Richard decided to pull that woman in to quiet her down. I was still in bed naked and terrified. As soon as he opened the door and pulled her in to shut her up, she charged the bed.

She had a butcher knife; she attacked me before Richard could get the door shut again. She viciously sliced my arm.”

Roberta raised her right arm in front of my face so I could see that long jagged scar. I just stared at it, inches from my face, shocked.

“She kept slashing at me until Richard wrestled her off me. Then she sliced and slashed at him like a wild animal before he could finally pin her down to the floor. She was screaming at the top of her lungs. By then the police were banging at the door demanding to be let in. My head was pounding. Richard motioned for me to get some clothes on and get out of there. So when I opened the door and cops came charging in, I snuck out and made my way through the crowd dripping blood through the towel I held to the wound and made it to the exit.”

I was exhausted just listening to her tell the story, ruing the trauma I must have caused Ricky by knocking at his door, charging in to flaunt my body like that mad woman of his nightmares.

“Oh, my God, Roberta,” was all I could think to say.

“Yeah, well. Someone took a photo of me running away. I let the bloody towel shield my face and escaped before anyone could stop me. I drove all the way to Spokane crying. The article in the newspaper the next day broadcast the most humiliating experience of my entire life. I had told one of my friends that I was going to have lunch with Richard O’Hare, so at least she had to have guessed who was in that photograph. The caption under it read, ‘One of the two women in Richard O’Hare’s hotel room flees the scene.’”

“Was that Jennifer who had gone berserk?”

“I don’t know for sure; I can’t assign a face to the beast that burst in upon me, but in retrospect I do imagine that is exactly who it had been. You can see why I had asked if it had been a woman who killed Danni and Ricky that woman had wanted to kill us both.” She heaved a sigh, some of the weight having been lifted—that part having been shifted to me. I felt the oppressive weight.

“John—the ‘sheriff’, I corrected—told me that Jennifer Wilson did have a criminal record. She must have been charged for that?”

“I’ve avoided looking at the series of articles in the follow-up of that incident report, but I found them last night to copy for you if you ever want to see them. I think Ricky was charged with something too.”

Understandably curious, I asked, “Do you know what happened to Richard in the days after that incident? I can imagine probably going into hiding. He seemed a little paranoid to me sometimes.”

“I know that he spent the night in jail after he was released from the hospital. I checked on that the day after, when I was safely in Spokane. I don’t think he ever did another public interview or book signing.”

“What about you? You had to have had stitches in that arm. Had you driven all the way to Spokane before you went to ER?”

“Yeah. I drove directly home and cleaned up before I went in; then I claimed I had had an accident, which no one questioned. I don’t know why. How could I have done that by accident?”

We sat there like two little birds in a nest clutching each other.

Still holding her, I asked, “You must have talked directly to Richard after that. Did the two of you dissect what happened?”

“I did talk to Richard. He remembered my name and had to have been quite persistent to find me way off the beaten path in Spokane. I think he might have been helped by his publisher; they have always supported him. One morning about a year later, I think. I was sitting in my boss’s office discussing how we were going to proceed with my transfer to Seattle that had just been approved. A colleague looked in and told me I had an urgent call. I excused myself. Then I picked up my phone and heard Richard say, ‘Do you think we could have lunch sometime?’ I was thrilled.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” I said. “He was like that, wasn’t he?”

“He is, but by then I was back with Donald. Still, I was thrilled that he had called. ‘Richard, how are you?’ I asked full of enthusiasm. ‘I

survive,’ is what he said, ‘but I have worried about you ever since that awful night.’ After assuring him I was okay, he asked again, ‘Would you please meet me for lunch?’ I agreed, suggesting Apple Bees on central at 12:30. I thought I’d be able to free myself up for the rest of the afternoon. To that he replied, ‘Yes, yes, yes.’”

“So did he explain what had happened following the event?”

“Yes. He was so apologetic. He said he loved me and was so sorry about what had happened and how hard it had been to track me down. I think every word was true. I guess I broke down when I told him that I was engaged and didn’t feel like I should risk that relationship, but I needed to get with him long enough to close out what had ruined that perfect day—yeah,” she smiled, “I told him just how perfect it had been for me; I shouldn’t have. But he understood.”

“So was that it then,” I asked. “Was it just a lunch?”

She looked over at me and then away. “No,” she lowered her voice, “I just couldn’t resist him. He made it happen again, another perfect day and night together. I broke it off with Donald the next day. Pretty soon I was in Seattle and even though we were never an item, we were always close. I’ve never been as close with anyone else since then. If he called, we could talk for hours about anything or nothing at all. And if I called him, he always spent some time with me. That was until he found Danni—or till Danni found him. He had been worried about meeting up with her and asked my advice on what he should wear and how he should act. Can you imagine? Him worrying about how he should act with a woman. He had become a hermit by then. Danni rescued him.”

“Rescued him? From what? Had he made many major changes in his life after that incident? Did he become paranoid; had he changed his usual behavior patterns?”

“Oh yes. He and his publisher locked down any access to him, and of course he never published another book. I was thrilled when he told

me he was working on another one. He told me about the concept for the novel and where he saw it going.”

“How do you mean they ‘locked down access to him’? At six-foot-four, he was pretty easy to identify. And with his looks.”

We smiled at each other remembering the allure.

“What he did was have his familiar website run exclusively by his publisher and his former email and social media addresses were taken over by someone or some automatic process run by his publisher. The phone number he had given me,” she twisted her wrist for me to see it again, “is still active, but it’s set up to always have a ‘sorry Richard is unavailable’ message. Try it sometime. It probably still works. I’ve called it just to hear his voice. Oh, and he told me he grew a full beard that made him look like the cave man in Geico commercials and if he ever went out, he would wear grungy clothes. But he had shaved the only time we met in person after that.”

“Danni contacted him by requesting Facebook friendship long after that incident, so how did she do that?”

Roberta laughed. It was so good to see her laugh. “I asked Danni how she had gotten in contact with Ricky when we were handling the inheritance issues for Howard Farm; she told me that it was through his Facebook. I explained that I had thought his Facebook page had been disconnected. She laughed, telling me how she had gained access to his active page.”

I was confused. “I never tried reaching him through Facebook. I’d heard that no one under fifty-five uses Facebook anymore anyway.”

“I know, but he did. I think he only had like twenty-five or thirty Facebook friends on there; it was a different, totally unrecognized name that he gave out to only the friends or associates he knew personally.”

I was very curious now. “So how did Danni come to know it?”

“Danni thought what she had done was pretty clever. It was. She was getting her condo in Washington ready to sell so she could move

back to Kentucky. Her real estate broker was having her place assessed and when the assessor was there, he noticed all the O'Hare novels on her shelf and said he had assessed a house in Renton for Mr. O'Hare. He told her he uses Facebook messaging to communicate with him rather than having a phone number. 'A weird guy,' he told her. So she told the assessor she would like to receive a copy of his report, and would he send it to her as a message to her Facebook page. She told him that if he went to his 'friends' section she would put herself in there for him. After he gave her his iPhone she found the Mr. O'Hare page. The handle was: 3-1-L-d-O-B-u-n-n-y-1-3, and that, my dear Marylou is the Wild O'Hare 13 we knew and loved. Isn't that funny?"

"Funny?" I jumped up nearly knocking Roberta on the floor and ran into my bedroom to grab Ricky's laptop. Roberta followed.

"What are you doing?"

"My God, Roberta, you cracked it! You really did." I had the laptop open and had pushed the power on key. When the screen came up asking for a password, I typed in: '3-1-L-d-O-B-u-n-n-y-1-3'. Bingo! All these windows popped up everywhere. I felt Roberta's breasts pressed down heavily on my shoulder watching what I was doing. I turned around surprising her with hugs and kisses while exclaiming. "That's his password, Roberta. We have it! We have all of what he has written and was writing. We have it!"

And that was only day one of Roberta's stay in Kentucky. Together we extracted his Word files of all that he had written in documenting the story of Danni McGee. So having completed our behavioral autopsy of Ricky, we were set to engage on the adventure of getting his final work published. I had nearly persuaded Roberta to stay on as we recovered and assembled Richard's files into a volume that was worthy of having his name placed on it. I hoped to have it done by Christmas.

In the days following we visited Howard Farm; Roberta found that delightful as I knew she would. She loves Loretta—the whole family too, of course. Maryanne’s meeting that closed out the final will with Jamesons was most enjoyable for both of us to sit in on I must say.

In scrounging through Richard’s files, Roberta found what we are certain is what Ricky had been working on and scrapped when Danni came into his life. We both extol its literary quality—as if we know what we’re doing in that regard. He actually had an outline for that novel which was atypical of his approach and maybe reflected his advancing age. But Roberta had had a few conversations with Ricky about that next book which he had acknowledged was way overdue. That conversation had taken place only a week or two before Danni came along—right after his father had died.

We’ve discussed these upcoming volumes with Ricky’s publishing house, and they are anxious to get them into print. Roberta opted for trying to write the rest of the novel Ricky had intended to title, *The Last Day*. I’ve been busy on *The Ruffian Syndrome* volume securing the necessary permissions for it to be legitimate. Piecing Richard’s files together in the order he intended has been no minor task.

Roberta left before the Thanksgiving holiday. I saw her off at the airport, expressing how much I had enjoyed our time together and how much I would miss her advice on getting the Ruffian effort out the door.

“It’s been grand,” she said stepping through the doorway with her roll-on heading for check in, but insisted she must get back to Donald.

“Donald?” I exclaimed. “I thought you and Richard had destroyed what there was of that relationship.”

Sheepishly, but laughing nonetheless, she said, “Oh no. Donald is very understanding. He’s a really nice guy.”

‘We’ve shared everything for weeks and you didn’t tell me that you were back with Donald!’ I was thinking. ‘Nice guy’? Are you kidding me? “You’d settle for a ‘nice guy’ after what you’ve known of Ricky?”

That makes no sense to me,” I should have kept my big mouth shut, but that’s not really what I do. Roberta understands me.

“I know,” she said, “but still...”

I stared at her, wondering whether I knew anything at all about her, “Still what?”

“Well, Ricky needs a father. They’re missing me, so I have to get back for the holidays.”

I hadn’t been told that there was a little Ricky, how old little Ricky was, or whether Donald liked the name. I hope to hell he does. Roberta was disappearing down the tunnel into the airplane by then, waving as she went.

So much for my obsessive attempts to tie loose ends together; some of them simply do not belong together. Ricky must have known that.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Still Searching for Protagonists

Many months after Jennifer's body had been recovered, the case had long since been closed, and Roberta had come and gone, Ricky's work on the Danni McGee book had finally been sent to the publisher. I was down in Estill County at the training track watching Willow on one of her routine works at the training track. It wasn't Jimmy who worked her this time though; it was Nathan. The whole family had come to watch. He did an excellent job—sat quiet and held her together nicely. He did as well as Jimmy would have, but although Nathan is not too heavy yet, he is growing fast and soon he will be much too heavy to continue riding as a career. But it was fun just to watch his elation, knowing that he knows this was not a situation that can last much longer.

I went on over to Howard Farm thinking of having another delicious lunch and a good time with the family. Conversation came around to a discussion of Jimmy's blossoming career in the spring meets around the country and why no one heard from Jimmy anymore. Sadie had begun teasing me about having lost a good one in Jimmy and for some reason a sense of loneliness struck me. I just wanted to leave without waiting for lunch, so I gave an excuse and left.

Leaving the farm, I took the Old Fox Road, thinking I would go on south to Irvine to see if I could pry that painting of Jennifer Wilson out of Denny's grip. I knew John was as attached to it as Denny was, but I was determined to get the thing this time. So I stormed into the office; it was Denny behind the desk. I insisted he give me the painting this time.

"I don't think we can release evidence," he responded. "The sheriff thinks we should keep it stored away."

I could see John was in his office having a conversation. I eased on over by the door even as Denny was quietly insisting that I not do that. John was saying, “I don’t know anything about who’s related to whom or who gets what; that’s none of my business. You’ll have to talk to a lawyer about any issue like that, Mr. O’Hare.”

I’m thinking, ‘Mr. O’Hare’? So I barged in.

“John, I want that painting Ricky made.” I glanced over at the Mr. O’Hare; he was huge. I mean tall... very tall, like way taller than even Ricky had been.

John obviously didn’t want me in there, so he yelled out, “Denny, get Ms. Johnson that painting and diary. Now!”

So... I left the office and went out to my car parked on Broadway, stashed my loot and waited for the mysterious Mr. O’Hare to leave the courthouse. Shortly he emerged. I ran up to him and instead of what I had intended to ask, as I stared up at him, it was, “How tall *are* you?”

“I don’t know, six seven, six eight something like that.”

“Are you related to Richard O’Hare?”

“Usually people ask me if I played basketball.” Then, “Yeah, I’m of the opinion that I am,” he laughed. “At least that’s what it says on my birth certificate, but I’ll be damned if I know for certain.”

“Oh, my God! Did Richard know?”

“I don’t know; he apparently didn’t tell anyone if he did, and my mom didn’t either. I just found out myself, why? Did you know him?”

“Yes, of course I knew him. I’m Marylou by the way, what’s your name?”

“Hello, Marylou. I’m Keith.” His lighthearted voice was so like Ricky’s. We shook hands. I was quite shaken.

“Have you had lunch, Keith?”

“No, but I don’t have much time; I’m just down for the day. I have to get back.”

“Back where?” I paused after that audacity and followed it with another: “Why do you have to get back?”

“Cincinnati. I usually pick my son up from school.”

“You have time,” I dared say. “The Backstreet Grub is just around the corner; it’s early and they’re fast. Hop in.”

He gave in. I’m usually lucky with the direct approach although I hadn’t been with Ricky.

“You like the Escalade?” Keith asked as he folded his six-foot eight inches like a switch blade to knife his way in.

“It’s alright. It matches my personality I guess.”

He laughed. That was good. “Did you like my father?”

“I did—a lot,” I admitted. “I was a Richard O’Hare fan, and I had read all his books before I ever met the man in person and when I met him, he was much more than I had expected. Have you read any of his books?”

“No. I’ve not read his novels. You said he was much more than you expected. Was that in a good way?” he asked.

Laughing, I clarified, “much taller, but a good bit less than you.”

He followed with “Do you think he was an honorable person?”

“He was; no one could ever persuade me otherwise,” I said and asked, “Is your wife working at an important job?”

He responded quickly enough, “No,” but then it wasn’t until we were exiting the Escalade at the restaurant that he completed what there was left to complete of the sentence: “She died.”

We were both halted by that, still sitting, but with our doors open, I turned to look directly at him. Finally I said, “I am so sorry for having pried into everything.”

“It’s okay; she’s been gone for ten years now. You get used to it.”

“Oh, my God. Have you been single all that time.” Then I finally realized how brazen I was being and threw up my hands. “Can I please just take all that back; it’s like no one ever taught me how to act.”

“It’s okay.” He had his phone in hand and was clicking a number. “Hi, Jean. Um. I’m way down in Kentucky and I’m afraid I might be late to pick up Bobby. Would you mind picking him up when you get your kids and keep him until I get back. I shouldn’t be too late.” A pause and then, “Oh, thank you. I’ll pick him up later.”

“So, do we have time for a down to business lunch now?” I asked, closing my door behind me.

“Nah. I’m not into business, just friends. We have plenty of time. I don’t think Jean will mind one more kid for a few hours if that’s how long it takes to answer all the questions that no one ever taught you not to ask,” he joshed. “I’ve got quite a few of my own to fire back at you.”

We found a table and ordered some ‘grub’, then we sat down with him beginning to answer the brazen question.

“Yes, I have not had a serious relationship in all that time; my wife Elaine died in childbirth. But my mother came to live with us to help with—well, raise—Robert. She died a month and a half ago now.”

“My goodness. I am so sorry. My mother died just last year, and I hadn’t got used to that when my best-friends-ever were killed. These are hard times to come to terms with—at least it has been for me.”

“Yeah. For me too, but even harder for Robert, I think.” He paused with a concerned look. “He’ll probably think I died when I’m not there to pick him up.”

“Oh, Keith. I’ll take you back to your car. We can talk another time—any time. Should we do that?”

“No.” After a very long pause, he asked, “Why did you like my father? Was it just because he was ‘likeable’?”

“Oh, Keith,” I started sobbing. “He was the most loveable man I’ve ever known.” Then I literally laughed through my tears when I added, “And in all honesty I have known a few, but I never knew your father in that way.”

Keith had this incredible laugh. “I understand from the Sheriff that he had known quite a few women which evidently did him in.”

“There was an incident involving an insane woman who ultimately killed him and Danni. But the facts associated with that incident were presented by the press to imply what was certainly not the truth. Facts are not truth, Keith. He had known a lot of women before Danni, but it was because they sought him out, and no one ever tempted him in the least once he and Danni hooked up. I know that for a fact because I tried. They were a truly amazing couple. I wish you could have known them both. They were as big hearted and generous as people get.”

“But one of his former lovers killed them?”

“That is indeed a fact, but that was a very disturbed woman.”

“He probably thought my mother was a disturbed woman too, but she wasn’t.”

“I’m guessing your mother was Amanda Heller—the only woman Richard ever married before Danni. Ricky had nothing but good things to say of her other than that they had both concentrated on the other one’s flaws rather than their own. He saw that as immaturity and their breakup as a tragedy.”

“Where’d you get that?”

“Reading between lines in his new book that will be published in a few weeks.”

“How do you know as a fact what’s in such a book and how do you read between lines of a book that hasn’t even been published?”

“It’s been quite a while now since I finished assembling his Word files and sent them to the publisher with an Afterword that I wrote by myself.”

“Really?”

“Honest to God, Keith.”

“Can I get a preview?”

“I’ll send you a pdf of the manuscript.”

“I’d like that very much. Does it tell his entire life story?”

“Pretty much even though it’s written about a woman and a horse – Danni McGee and Will Of Steel.”

“That wouldn’t leave much room for him.”

“Enough – all he ever wanted. Danni grew up around here. They married a year or so ago and retired to a farm just north of here; it’s where she grew up. I didn’t ever think your dad’s life was about him. You need to read the story; it provides his perspective on his own life and the world. I’ll get it to you. I’d be interested to learn what you think of it.”

“I definitely want to read it. When can you get it to me?”

“Give me your iPhone.”

He handed me his iPhone; after texting myself from it, I responded from my phone with the file as a text attachment, all before handing his phone back to him.

“Where do you come into this story other than in an Afterword that you wrote yourself, Marylou? Is there something I need to know about you and him?”

“All you need to know about your father and me, at least for now, is in the book. It’s your dad’s perspective of me; it isn’t very flattering or complete but it’s all true.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I’m hoping to publish a sequel to his book sometime by the way. I think I’d like you to play a major role in that endeavor.”

“Oh, no, not me. That’s not my game.”

“What is your game, Keith? Basketball?”

“What made you ask that?”

I responded, “Duh,” and followed that with laughter to which he responded in kind.

“Yeah, duh, huh? Okay, so I coach basketball and teach math. And you? A writer.”

“No. Radiologist who specializes on horses’ legs. I just write what I think needs to be written.”

“Oh. I guess I’ll understand that better after I read the book. But right now, I better get on my way.”

We rode back to the courthouse without saying much; he seemed to be inspecting Irvine, probably wondering how a big man from out west had fit into this environment. Getting out, he thanked me and said he’d have more to say after he’d read the book. “Give me a couple days.”

“Fine, but if you take too long, I will bug you with texts,” I warned. “We need to keep in contact to discuss the overlap of Ven diagrams.”

“Yes, Thanks.” One giant of a man had unfolded himself back to six feet eight inches in exiting my car, walked over to where he refolded even more uncomfortably in climbing into a tiny tan Chevrolet.

And speaking of Ven diagrams, he had accelerated the expansion of my universe.

I was driving north on 89 thinking, and before long I came upon the tan Chevrolet, passed it with a toot of my horn and a wave. He limits himself to the speed limit I guessed.

Thinking about Keith then, the realization that Ricky did have an heir checking on inheritance created what might be a bit tricky for the Jamesons. So I got on the horn with Roberta as a first step in finding out why this had fallen through the cracks in the legal system.

“Hi, Roberta. It’s Marylou. We have a new development.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“Ricky had a son.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope. He’s checking into things.”

“That can’t be. I asked all those women in his book. Who’s his mother? ”

“Amanda.”

“No. I asked her in particular. She told me Ricky had no children with her. Is this guy for real.”

“Flesh and blood spitting image of Ricky only four inches taller. He found out because Amanda died, and he found Ricky’s name on his birth certificate.”

“Really?” Roberta paused. Then, “Check with Maryanne about how secure that will is.”

So my next call was to Maryanne, who after some discussion assured me that the will was airtight.

“There might be some wiggle room on continuing royalties because his publisher seems to have issues going forward—maybe trying to get out of further royalties or maybe on that upcoming volume. What was your impression in dealing with them.”

“Nothing popped out. I’ll get you in the loop if I see any problem.”

That was that, as they say, and I was left pondering the conversation of which I had only heard a sentence or two between Keith and John. Was Keith just showing an obvious interest in the life of a father about whom he had just become aware or was he greedily going for whatever he could get out of a bad situation. John would probably have inferred the latter, but in thinking about the Keith I had just had the pleasure of meeting, it seemed unlikely. He would be finding out his legal status by reading his father’s latest volume. What would he think?

Nearly two complete days of torturous mental contortions kept me from calling before I heard from Keith again. He had told me to give him a couple days to read the manuscript. I’ll admit to squealing when I saw that the ding on my phone was caused by a text from the gigantic ghost of Ricky O’Hare. But I limited my initial typed response to “Hi!”

His text following the ding had been, “Could we talk?”

I hurriedly followed my initial response by typing, “My place or yours?” Too cute by half perhaps, it’s what I do.

“Irvine?” he asked.

“No, no, north of Paris.”

“Calais, Dover, or London?” he queried. “Is it Edinburg perhaps? Oslo, maybe? How far north?” These were each in a separate text, bang, bang, bang. “Or is that the wrong Paris?” He must have been laughing playfully. Ricky once wrote that I ‘beamed’, well I guess I may finally have met someone else who beams. I can tell; I know the type. I like that type of personality—even if they’ve had their low beams on as was the case when I met Keith in Irvine; there’s a button you can push with your foot or something that turns them on. I must have turned him on.

“Oh,” he continued. “You must mean Paris, Ky.”

“Yes, well, Cynthia. My father built a house there.” As I type, I’m remembering that it was because my mom preferred the Harrison Memorial Hospital for some reason—she had been ill a long time. It was finally ready just in time for her to die. “I stayed up here with my mom those days before she died and now the house is mine.” Then I started another text: “It’s actually a long way north of Paris.” I laughed to myself and started another text, “I could as accurately have said just south of Cincinnati.” Then, “but I hate Ohio, Keith.” Then I added an additional, “I’m sorry but I do.”

“You’re just around the corner from California, where I live,” he had texted well before I was done with my series of texts.

Then again, “I hate Ohio 2. I live a very few breast strokes from Ky BTW across Combs bridge in Cal.”

Then another immediate follow-on text: “Rob insists I move to Ky and buy a horse.”

He’s good at this texting but I hate it; it constrains verbosity, so I switch from type to voice mode just to get every word: “One day we must take Robert with us down in Estill County where his grandfather lived and give him a ride on Blueberry Hill.”

He was at it again: “The Blue I read in TRS no doubt. We’d luv it. This is schl day 4 Rob but my schl is out for pest cntrl, so there’s no math today.” Then, “You free today?”

I voice-text back methodically: “I am free every minute today and any and every day that you are hereafter. You have become a priority.”

Now no doubt typing every word he texts: “If I aim my car at Paris right now, where will I find you?”

I texted the address of my house in Cynthiana and added, “You do know that device of yours does audio and video, don’t you? We could be talking.”

“Yeah. Next time, but I’ll see you within the hour.”

So I had an hour at most to make over where I live a small fraction of my life into what might look livable to a giant and his son. Where to start? I sat, iPhone in hand, on a stool in my kitchen with my elbow on the island looking over at my living room with the nude painting of Danni dominating the room from over the couch. It had to go. Where to put it. If it’s so inappropriate—which it is—why had I hung it there? What did it say that I had so wanted said and now don’t? What of the large painting of Willow romping to victory that I had commissioned a named painter—not named Jimmy—to paint that hangs directly across the room from Danni? I had seen the two paintings as complimenting each other, but how do they? The ultimate femella of separate species? Neither have anything directly to say of Richard to anyone but me. It is my comfort zone, but it’s not a bit homey. A nude and a horse in one’s living room is a strange statement of one’s life, as though I were some sort of Lady Godiva. My furniture, all of it ultramodern, demonstrating an affluence to which I have clung my whole life, is derivative of my parents’ style—not really me. I sat there, wishing my house could look more like the O’Hare house at Howard farm; when one walked in there, one was immediately at ease, sitting anywhere. It was where real lives were lived. This room, this house, doesn’t portray anything like that.

It's where someone died. Maybe it would work as a separate room or nook in a museum—no meaningful life has ever been lived here.

I was sitting there, shocked when I heard the buzzer; what could I do but open the door. Seeing Keith shocked me again; he was so like Richard. "Oh, Keith!" was all I could say before sobs took my words with them. If he hadn't held me, I'm sure I would have fainted away.

He walked me to the couch and sat me down. "Would you like me to get you some water?" he asked.

"No, no."

"I've never been greeted like this before," he beamed. "I kind of like it."

"I've never greeted anyone like that before," I responded timidly, and recovering I went ahead and told him how distraught I was at the inappropriate decor of my house and how I had sat there disconsolate on that stool helpless to know how to hide my lifestyle from him. "It's just morbid memories; I don't live here enough to consider it a living space and I couldn't figure out how to change it before you came. It's just... well, it's embarrassing. I'm sorry. I'll make it all different if Robert comes. I hope you'll bring him next time."

He reached down, putting the back of his fingers to my mouth as he folded himself to the level of the couch beside me. "Marylou," he said. "This is the perfect setting for discussing The Ruffian Syndrome and if Robert were here, he wouldn't take his eyes off that horse."

"It is appropriate for this discussion I suppose." I was smiling now—beaming, I suppose Richard would have said—a quick recovery from another embarrassing situation—my skill set according to Ricky.

"You and my father really did know everything about each other," he laughed, "didn't you?"

"I think we did, and now you know me too."

"I'm learning," he said and kissed me in an indescribably different way than I have ever been kissed; it made me wish I had waited for this

to define what a kiss should be. He held me for a moment, making me feel so tiny and totally protected. Then he said, “You are a really good person in my book as well as my dad’s, by the way. So... let’s discuss The Ruffian Syndrome if that’s okay and could we please begin by you answering a few of my questions about your Afterword?”

“Sure.” I had recovered my composure completely by this point and queried, “What would you like to know?”

“Well, for starters, I assume the painting and diary that the sheriff instructed his subordinate to give you were a nude painting my father made of his killer and his diary of ‘quote’ other accomplishments.”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t tell me anything about them when we were at lunch, but I saw them in the back seat.”

“No. I did think about it, but I thought they would need context that you would get from reading your dad’s words and the Afterword. I will give them to you; They’re in the other room. They probably belong to you anyway.”

“I just need to see them. Is there anything particularly relevant to me in the diary?”

“It is more of a log than a diary, but it puts some dates of events in order—your parents’ divorce for one thing. Your mother must have been pregnant when the divorce was finalized; I’ve looked at it again. So how could he not have known that you were on the way?”

“She didn’t show up in person. I know that much because I talked to her lawyer’s assistant who is still alive—as of yesterday.” He paused here for a little while; I remained silent. “I wish she had... shown up. I think it would have changed all our lives for the better.”

“Yeah, but there’s a whole world of things that would be different and some of them have been extremely good, Keith. You and me, right now, for one thing. Meeting you has cheered me up a bunch.”

“Me too.” After a pause he added, “And Robert.”

“What your father did in his last couple of years overshadows even his best books as far as I’m concerned.”

“Apparently. I need to read them.”

“He has built happiness for a lot of people who needed some.”

“Good. He and Danni seem to have distributed their financial well-being as it should have been done.”

“Keith, I’ve been worrying about that ever since I heard John and you talking. Jamesons were so worried about whether the legal system would be fair to them that Danni and Ricky sewed their will pretty tight. What is your thinking on that issue?”

“What’s done is done is my thinking on the inheritance. I have no claim and don’t need it; they deserve it; done deal. Right now, having met you is a part of my father’s legacy I’m happiest about.” Then after a significant pause, he asked, “Are you and Jimmy still an item?”

I am not usually an emotional person, but this day was different. I began tearing up again. First it was just watery eyes but then it was sobbing. I couldn’t quit. He put his arm around me again and I buried my face in his chest until I could speak. “No,” I answered. “That’s the only reason I went on down into Irvine. I had gone down just to watch Willow work at the training track. Nathan rode her for the first time. I was so happy for him; he did an excellent job, and the family was so proud. I was going to stay for lunch at the farm like I usually do but then Sadie began teasing me about Jimmy, and I had to get away. So I went on into Irvine as an excuse to leave the farm as much as anything.”

“I’m glad you did, but what about Jimmy? Is he okay?”

“Jimmy’s fine; he’s going to be a top jockey, I think. We were high after Willow’s win and for a while thereafter, until he—and I—decided that he was way too young for me—and too small,” I added because it just struck me as rather funny, and I laughed. “I wish I hadn’t written about that in the Afterword.”

“I like knowing as much as I can before I make decisions,” he was laughing too.

“Keith, you’ll find out eventually—it might as well be right now—I’ve been a complete floozy. But I’m done with it; I really am. I could turn my life around like your father did. People can. I really could; I want to; I will. I know how much Robert means to you; he matters to me too—already, and I haven’t even met him yet. I’m not a bad person, Keith. I’m really not; I care about people. I think I could be one hell of a mother—well, a stepmother... even just a friend to Robert; I really do.” I stopped then and looked down despondently. “Blab, blab, blab, that’s all I ever do.” Then I looked up into a generous smile.

“You know, that sounds like one hell of a proposition,” he laughed, but in a very kind way. “If you feel that way once you know us, we’ll probably both say yes, but you don’t know either me—or Robert—yet. There isn’t any hurry. Let’s figure this out analytically before we do the QED thing. My day job is teaching math. Did you know that?”

“Yes, you told me, but I would have guessed as much whether I had been told or not because mathematics flows down the tail male line of your pedigree and I’m into pedigrees.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Robert’s too.”

“I know I don’t know everything about you or Robert, but I already know that I want you both to add the missing meaning to my life.”

I had risen to go into my bedroom where I got Ricky’s journal and the painting. When I came back Keith was inspecting the painting of Danni.

“What do you think of it as art,” I asked him.

“I think it’s good, but I’m no expert on art. I like the person herself. There is a quality in her expression that needs no justification. How old was she when this was done?”

We both stood transfixed looking at Danni—it is overwhelming for me at times. “About our age, I think. Maybe just a year or two older. She’d been through some hard times by then.”

“Yeah, I read about her situation with the painter. There is a lot of sadness in the world, isn’t there. I also recall that she told Richard that to paint someone in the nude one should be nude oneself. Not a bad idea I would have to say.”

“There is a lot of sadness,” I agreed. “I think I’ve spent most of my life pretending that there isn’t. I’m trying to fix that in myself.”

“We can’t let it sap the joy though. The world would be a hell of a lot worse without some joy. I think I’ve probably pretended that wasn’t true and I need to fix that.” That was Keith’s contribution on the topic.

“We get stuck in ruts, don’t we,” I said, handing the leather-bound diary to him and held Richard’s painting of Jennifer up for him to see.”

“He totally abandoned mathematics, didn’t he,” was his response.

“Sometimes his statements make it sound as though it had been a kidnapping that had taken him from mathematics by sirens of the sea instead of him abandoning it.” I defended Ricky as I always will.

“Yeah. I think mom fell for the mathematician who got lost in the sweet songs. I think she was studying mathematics when she met him. She always wanted me to be a mathematician. Athletics got in the way of that for me—and sirens too I guess, but I stuck with a good one I had found. Elain was quality. I suppose my dad ended up doing that too.”

He scanned through the journal, pausing for a moment on the page with the name Elain, noting that there wasn’t very much information in there. I recalled it being only 2012 and a book with a title, ‘Something Royal.’ Then he went back to the first couple pages that mentioned his mother. I had leaned Jennifer’s nakedness up against the end of the couch. He glanced over at it, laying the journal on the coffee table.

I stood there awkwardly on one foot and then the other for a bit before I asked, “Did you want to discuss the book?”

“Not really,” he said. “I think I understand it all; it makes sense to me. I’m sure I would enjoy hearing the entire book read in your voice, but that’s a little ridiculous, since it’s mostly just your voice I would be enjoying anyway and I’d rather you were telling me about your future.”

“Keith. I want to be more than the sweet song of a siren. I can’t see the future, but I’d like one that has you and Robert in it.”

“Come home with me.”

I’ve done that with men I knew much less well than I already knew Keith. I think they felt lucky—probably thought it meant something to me that it didn’t. This did. It meant the world. I don’t think Keith felt lucky; he knew I’d come if he asked. But me? I felt like I have the winning lottery ticket, and I shouldn’t lose it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Crossing the Line

Watching now from the passenger's side as six-feet-eight-inches of manhood scrunched itself in behind the wheel of a tan sedan was a bit painful to behold. I held back an urge to suggest we use my Escalade, because I didn't want to disturb my current special guest status. I knew he would bring me back when my audition was over—whether I nailed it or tapped out. If I wanted the rest of my life to be like this, and I did, I had better figure out what this role entails. I realized that it was I who was being test driven, not the car.

“What time does Robert get out?” I asked.

“Three.”

“What time do you usually get out from teaching and coaching?”

“His school isn't far from the university, so he usually walks over to the gym and sits in the bleachers till I'm done.”

“So you're a professor—not a high school math teacher and coach. The pest control people aren't going after collegiate gym rats today?”

“So I lied. I don't teach classes on Fridays; we'll have to be at the gym by three.”

“You lied?” I teased. “And here I've been honestly confessing all my sins to a confirmed liar. We're going to have to be truthful with each other if this thing is going to work, Keith.” I was laughing.

“Yeah. But you needed to get those confessions off your chest.”

“I did actually. It feels better knowing you already know about my having been a floozy and are taking me home with you anyway.”

“I'm surprised you agreed to come—and very happy that you did. I'm tired of sharing samples of my life with an eyedropper; now you'll get the fire hose treatment. You can see what you think.”

I mused about that for a couple of miles of his slow driving before I jumped in with both feet, not worrying whether it mixed metaphors or

anything else: “Me too!” I said, dragging his right hand away from two o’clock on the steering wheel and clutching onto it. “I’m all in. I will tell you truthfully anything I’ve ever said or done if you ask, but I don’t want to bore you with it because it’s pretty damned meaningless before I met Danni and your father. I’m proud of most of what I’ve done since then. I think they started a major change in me. I hope you’ll pick me as your draft pick in this role I’m hoping desperately to win today.”

Then we drove a couple more miles holding each other’s hand on up US 27 and through Alexandria before he replied, “You know this is a teamwork role; we’re going to have to work on it together; I’m not really up to it alone. And... I’m going to need some coaching myself.”

We were on 275 now crossing the bridge into the hated Ohio, even if the sign says California. Yes, there’s a town in Ohio by that name and apparently, I’m going to be living in it, because just over the bridge Keith took that exit and into a residential area lined with what I would consider ‘very modest’ single story homes but with spacious well-kept yards. Then he drove into the driveway of one of them.

“Here we are,” he said. “There are no nudes and no horses climbing the walls so you may have to redecorate.”

My thought at first was that he had picked a house at random just to rattle my senses, but I realized after a moment’s reflection that a pole with a basketball hoop on it meant that the tan Chevrolet sedan in which I sat belonged on this concrete slab. The remaining question was, “Do I?”

“So this is what houses look like in Ohio,” was all I could come up with as a comment. I realize I should have been more imaginative and said something like, “Oh, it’s so cute,” but it wasn’t even cute.

“You didn’t think you’d be moving up in the world, did you?” He laughed—yes, at least he did laugh.

I got out to have a look around. “It must be a safe neighborhood,” was all I could add to my initial comment.

“Yeah. There aren’t many break ins or cars stolen, but an Escalade might not be so lucky.” He seemed serious. But after a moment he added in a despondent-sounding voice, “Shall I take you back where you belong right now?” He was walking back to the car.

“No,” I yelled—alert now at last. “I think I am needed in there, and I think that’s where I would love to live from now on. Is that okay?”

With a hand still on his door handle, he said, “I should have let you follow me in your Escalade, shouldn’t I? I’m sorry; I’ll take you back whenever either you or Robert think there is no need for you, but I will never think that myself. I need you desperately; Robert needs you; this house needs you. We’d make an unlikely couple, but damn I’d like it if you lived here with us.”

He kissed me and picked me up higher than I’ve ever been except maybe one time when I was on a seventeen hands Olympic jumper, and this was more fun than that. He opened the front door still carrying me as we entered my new home. It was ugly. But God, I loved being here. Lives are being lived here—mine included.

I spoke my thoughts aloud, “I hope Robert is aware of how much he needs me.”

“He is.” He laughed and added, “he read the book and told me to go get you.”

“Talk about saving the good news till last,” I said as I kissed the giant still holding me. “Where’s our bedroom?”

“You had to know I would at least have a king-sized bed in this tiny little house,” he said carrying me through that doorway. Stroking the lintel as we entered was when I noticed that all of the doorways in this tiny little house were taller than Keith, and therefore, very much taller than normal. He had done some remodeling, and it still looked like this.

“Yeah. It’s nice,” I said somewhat insincerely. “You can set me down now. I won’t run away. I’m a stray mutt your son brought home that you can’t get rid of now.”

He set me down.

“Are you okay with it till we get a setting more appropriate for the jewel to be placed in it.”

“It’s perfect, Keith, but we might want to redecorate.” I had begun snooping around from room to room till I found Robert’s where I stayed for a while searching for clues to what he likes. In addition to his king-sized bed and huge computer screen, unattached to a computer which I assumed he had with him at school, there was a retro blackboard with chalk and an eraser in its tray; Greek symbols were scrawled on it and an equation that set a function $F(x)$ equal to the definite integral of the differential of that function from zero to x . Beneath the equation he had written in cursive, “The mathematical equivalent of ‘a rose is a rose’ by any other name.” I remembered from calculus in college the symbols for the integration and differentiation operators, including $dF(x)/dx$.

Keith was in the kitchen, so I yelled out, “Are you tutoring him on university level math? Is this kid really doing that in school. He’s ten, Keith, aren’t most ten-year-olds in the fourth grade? I think I was still being challenged by improper fractions at that age, and believe me, they all seemed improper to me. They still do, and I don’t consider myself stupid.”

He was standing next to me then and handed me a ham sandwich.

“Do you eat ham,” he asked, ignoring my questions.

“Keith, I was looking forward to helping him with his homework. So much for that dream,” I laughed.

“Yeah, well, that’s not what he needs. I think what he wants from you is what you know about horses and girls and the ways of a world that’s a lot different from what he’s lived in so far.”

“He has earned a scholarship to matriculate into Marylou’s graduate level course in care and treatment of x-ray equipment, horses, and pretty women as well as the manipulation of ordinary people to get what both you and they have desperately wanted all our lives. But he’s evidently

learned that last part along with mathematics from his dad. And yes, I do like ham; this ham sandwich is delicious.”

“Good. Will you come with me to the University of Cincinnati to meet my son and the basketball team?”

“I’m anxious to do just that. Is it time?”

“It’d probably be good to get there a little early, I’m ready to leave whenever you are, but let’s see if you fit in any of his tennis shoes.”

“Please don’t carry me into that gym or make me defend against a seven-footer.”

“Okay, but you’ll have to play Robert a game of horse.”

“I can do that.” Then trying on some of Robert’s tennis shoes that he had outgrown, one finally fit, “Okay, this pair works; I’ll play you a game of horse too, but you both have to ride a horse for real.”

The commute into the big city wasn’t too bad up 471.

We were both nervous, I think, and talking to pretend we weren’t. But he was easy to talk to even on stuff that didn’t matter. He asked what I thought of buying Robert a horse. I suggested we go down to Howard Farm tomorrow to see how the two of them like being around horses. “I think he’d enjoy a horse. I think it’s good for a kid.”

Keith led me through the locker room; I knew what locker rooms look like; I had played sports in high school. I didn’t like the smell of locker rooms then or now, but at least there was no one in there yet. Then we emerged out into the gym; it’s amazing how large they are with the extreme heights up into the rafters with tiers of seats going all the way up. We walked over to the sideline at center court. He put his clipboard down on the table after looking through a page or two.

Someone entered pushing a cart with balls in it; one tumbled out and proceeded rolling my way. I picked it up and bounced it hard a couple of times; it fit nicely in my hand, so nicely, in fact, that it felt natural dribbling it a few steps over past the three-point line and did the

jump shot I used to be good at. Swoosh! That felt so good. And then I heard the acclaim of a little boy.

“That was awesome!”

That ‘little’ boy happened to be almost as tall as I am, and he was clapping for me.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed. “You were supposed to be ten years old – you’re a man.” And that little man ran over and gave me a bear hug. Oh my God!

Keith was there with us then as well as a guy in shirt and shorts that was even taller than Keith, who exclaimed, “Nice shot.” Then, looking over at Keith, “Is this my replacement, coach?”

“Nah. She’s just a motivational speaker I found somewhere who is going to emphasize that losing is a disease.”

Several more players joined us on the court then and Keith began with the introductions: “Marylou Johnson, this is Robert,” he ruffled his hair, “and Michael... “ I’m not good at remembering names after introductions, but there was quite a list. Michael was the first I had encountered after my lucky shot; I keep thinking of his last name as Jordan, but I knew that couldn’t be correct.

Then Robert took my hand and led us over to what I supposed was his usual pew at practice.

“How far do you have to walk to get here after school?”

“Three and a third blocks.”

“Oh,” I looked him over as I said, “ten thirds, huh?”

He threw his head back and laughed so loudly that his father and the team looked over at us and then he pushed his hand out and I slapped it. “This is gonna work!” I said as—still holding his hand—as we doubled over laughing. So, that is how it started, and it has kept going just about like that. We dig each other; we really do.

Watching Keith’s team play—how he interacted with them, how he showed them by doing what he intended them to do, and just played in

various situations as illustration—made me proud to be associated with him. I could see the pride Robert had in his father. When the practice was over, it wasn't just over. The interaction of players, Keith, and even Robert continued in different groups around the court. Michael came over with a ball and offered it to me, inviting me to come shoot with him at a side basket, which I did. We conversed as we shot at the hoop, caught the rebounds, and passed the ball back and forth.

“How do you and coach know each other.”

“She is his girlfriend!” Robert had come over to where we were.

Michael and I laughed, and I told him that I had known his father, to which Robert clarified, “Before he even knew he had a father.” He was laughing as only a ten-year-old boy can laugh before adding, “Well, I suppose even Keith knew he had a father.” Still laughing, he went on, “even if he didn't know who in the hell his world-famous father was.”

Keith came dribbling over then. “Michael, you and Robert want to play Marylou and I? Half court.”

“Yes,” Robert emoted. “I'm guarding Marylou.”

Keith looked over at me. “That okay.”

“Sounds fun.” And fun it was. I don't know who won—everybody, I think.

Keith took Michael out to pizza with us. That was fun too, Robert in control of embarrassing questions and explanations about which he knew way less than he thought he did. It was hilarious; it was obvious that Michael was seeing a side of the coach of which he had been totally unaware.

When we got back to California, Robert insisted that I play him a game of horse.

“I think Marylou is probably tired, Robert.”

“No. I think Robert needs to get beat,” I said.

“You and who else?” was Robert's defiant response.

“Me, myself, and I you little twit.”

He threw me the ball he had retrieved from an unlocked door in the garage. “You first.”

I dribbled the ball a couple times and did my jump shot that went swoosh.

“Is that the only shot you got?” he goaded as he shot a duplicate jumper that swooshed.

I shot a set shot from the foul line that rolled around and off the hoop. He followed with a short Jabar hook shot that he sank. Mine missed. “That’s an ‘H’,” he said taking a two-hand shot from twenty feet that just missed. I did my jump shot from fifteen that sank, and his missed. On and on it went with Keith leaning back against his tan car watching with obvious delight, until finally one of mine swooshed, and his missed. Then I proved it with another swoosh to tack on a final ‘E’. Robert was as gracious as I had come to expect from his father. We slapped hands and that was that. Time for ice cream.

Before going in I asked Keith if he planned on our going to the farm the next day. He said that was what he thought we had all wanted and that he looked forward to it. I explained that I should call Loretta to let her know we were coming.

“Yeah, that sounds like the right thing.”

“Good. I’ll call her now.”

Keith went on in to get the ice cream and I placed the call which Loretta answered after a few rings.

“Hi, Marylou; it’s good to hear.”

“It is good. Hmm. Is it alright if I bring some company down with me tomorrow?”

“It’d be lovely. Who?”

“Well... it’s a bit of a surprise. It was for me. I thought I should prepare you all before we get there because otherwise when you see him it will be a shock.”

“A shock? Like how Marylou?”

“It’s Ricky’s son, Keith and grandson Robert.”

“No! You’re kidding me, Marylou.”

“I’m not. But I assure you that there is not a thing to worry about. The will and everything else are secure and Keith and Robert just want to learn all they can about Richard O’Hare, where he lived, and see the horses. Keith just found out that Richard was his father, and let me tell you, Loretta, when you see him, you’ll think it’s Ricky himself except that he’s even taller than Ricky was. I think you all will love him and Robert. Robert’s only ten, but he’s already tall, but I think Nathan and Sadie will have a ball with him. I’m in love with them, Loretta. You’ll see.”

“Oh, Marylou I am so happy for you—and us. We’ll have us a big farmhouse dinner welcoming those boys. You get here early; we’ll eat mid-afternoon.”

“What can we bring?”

“Not nothin’; we got it all here.”

“Well you don’t have beef cattle. We’ll bring a big roast. I’ll bet Thomas can get that cooked up for us out there in that cooker thing he fixed up.”

“He could alright. I’ll tell him.”

So that was the conversation I explained to the boys as I ate my ice cream.

Robert was ecstatic. “I want to ride Blueberry Hill if they won’t let me ride Blue Kentucky Moon.”

“They won’t,” Keith said. “You’re too big and Blue Moon is too young.”

Showing more vulnerability than I had seen in him, he bemoaned, “I don’t even know how to ride.”

“I’ll bet Nathan will show you how,” Keith suggested.

“Or Sadie. She’s my age.”

Keith smiled at me and then told Robert, “Go get your homework out of the way. This will be a busy weekend.”

After he had gone to his room, I explained to Keith that I wouldn't have offered the huge roast if I didn't know where to get one on the way south. There's a place just south of Cynthiana where we can get a giant rump roast. I think I'll call them to make sure there is one big enough and ready to go.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Almost Heaven

Oh yeah. That was Keith and my first amazing night together that was shattered at the crack of dawn by Robert crashing down between us where there was no room, laughing, then wriggling us apart with kisses to us both. What had I gotten myself into? Fun times is the answer to that question.

We stopped off at my house in Cynthiana to switch vehicles for the red Escalade that Robert couldn't get over. "Oh my gosh, Marylou. You aren't even six feet tall, and you drive a big vehicle like this?"

"Maybe I'm not six feet tall and have two left thumbs, but I'm still marginally taller than you, young man," to which he laughed much harder than one would think such inanity deserved, but he is just a kid. As far as the painting of Danni in the nude, regarding which I had suggested to Keith that we just pick up the Escalade from the garage and not go into the house, well... Robert over-heard and over-rode that decision, wanting a show-and-tell of my existence. He giggled at the nude painting of Danni at first, but then he just stood and looked at it thoughtfully. I chose not to engage his thinking. And just as Keith had predicted, the painting of Willow winning that Breeders Cup race was what totally captivated him.

"Is she really as great as Ruffian was?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Your grandfather and I wanted to find out. We'll probably never know."

"We will see her, right?"

"Yes, we will."

We picked up our seven-pound rump roast, with Keith having added a large prime rib roast to our purchase. Keith took over the driving after the stop at the butcher shop. So I became the designated person to walk Robert through the features of the vehicle and address the occasional

interruptions to quell fears of upcoming horse events. We proceeded on South on 27 to Paris where I switched Keith over to Winchester Road driving down through the huge spread of Claiborne Farm.

“That building way over there is where Ruffian was foaled,” I tell Robert, and I see by his wide eyes and rapt attention that he is awed.

“Secretariat lived there too,” he says.

At Winchester we hopped onto 89 with Robert now noisily probing features and capabilities of my x-ray equipment in the back and every feature of my Cadillac. Then,

“Willow killed somebody, right?”

“Yes; but she’s not a killer; she just likes being treated with a little respect,” to which I added, “like any woman.”

Robert did his loud laughter thing, with Keith looking over at me with a smirk.

After what must have been a thoughtful pause, Robert asked, “Is that why Jennifer killed my grandfather?”

There was no smirk when Keith said, “Enough, Robert. Enough.”

We drove on in silence then for several miles before Robert asked, “Why is my step-grandmother hanging over your couch naked?”

Keith was struggling to hold back a laugh now. Finally I just said, “She was my best friend.”

After another brief and respectful pause, he asked, “What’s your mother’s name?”

“Annabelle.”

Finally Keith’s slow driving delivered us to the exit onto New Fox Road. The sign had to have brought The Ruffian Syndrome afterword events to Robert’s and probably all of our minds but thankfully he said nothing. And then we were there.

Jameson was walking toward the O’Hare house carrying a pail with vegetable greens hanging over the rim. He sat it down when he saw us and came over with Bugs lumbering beside him to the driver’s side of

our vehicle—he was expecting that to be me no-doubt. When Keith stepped out instead, Jameson took a step back and exclaimed, “I nevah saw such a thang in mah life. Nevah! You ah Rikki O’Hare only a bit biggah! Even biggah!” He was laughing now, clasping Keith’s hand. “Oh my oh my, is it evah so good to see *you!*”

“It is a pleasure for me to meet my dad’s dearest friends.”

Sadie had come running out of the O’Hare house and Jenni was bounding along with her, barking happily. She grabbed Jenni up as she approached Robert who had just exited and was staring around at the various facilities of the farm. “This is my dog, Jenni. She was your grandfather’s favorite dog. She’s really nice. You want to hold her?”

Robert began, “She was named after...” and then he just stopped mid-sentence, blushing. “I’m... sorry...” I thought he was going to cry, so I took a step toward him before Keith touched me lightly.

Sadie stepped right up to Robert then. “It’s alright. She is a really nice dog. Pet her.”

Robert reached out his hand to pet the dog and Sadie handed Jenni over to Robert in a way he couldn’t avoid. I could see that Robert was enamored with Jenni, Sadie, the farm, and the world. Nathan had come over by then and the three of them were jabbering away, with Jenni now bouncing around between them on the ground and off they all went, out toward the barn.

Loretta and I hugged, and then she introduced everyone. Thomas showed up last with he and Keith conversing with ease with regard to the roast. I did hear the word ‘coach’ and Thomas asking whether Cincinnati would be in some tournament or other before I took the two roasts, handing one to Thomas, the other to Keith and drifted off into the house with the women and Jameson to work on the vegetables.

Shortly, through the window I saw the kids out in the pasture with the horses. Nathan was stroking Willow, but Sadie and Robert were

next to Blue with Moon poking his nose in between them. Lulu and I were standing next to each other, watching.

“Oh my, Marylou. You know, it’s like I died and went to heaven here on Howard farm. You can’t imagine.”

“Lulu,” I said. “I think this *is* heaven. I have never known what it would be like to be so at ease somewhere lovely like this with someone I love and to have such a wonderful child who loves me too.”

“It’s grand, isn’t it? Look at them chilluns, would you? They puttin’ Bobby on Blue.”

“Oh no, Lulu. He can’t ride.”

“He shore enuf can, Marylou, with Sadie up there with him.”

Sadie sat behind Robert with her arms wrapped around him tightly. Nathan was leading them back to the stable, where the men were all talking and watching the proceedings. Willow and Moon were both following. Robert raised his arm whooping with all of them laughing. “This really is heaven,” I said before I went back to the peeling of vegetables.

Later I walked out with Lulu to the barn where the action was. I could see that Willow and Moon had been locked in their stalls and were contentedly snatching hay from their overhead mangers. Then I stood and watched Robert and Sadie interacting as she demonstrated just how to neck rein with no adult help. Robert was very attentive and demonstrated his unique ability to immediately catch on to anything—even in using pressure with his heels in communicating with Blue. I looked over at Keith who winked back at me. Sadie got on in front of Robert then and asked whether it would be alright to take Robert down to the river. She looked at Thomas who looked over at Keith for the head nod, and off they went with everyone all smiles.

Thomas goaded Keith to go one-on-one to the hoop he had set up in the barn.

“Marylou and I will take on you and Nathan.” He paused, asking, “Is that okay, M-L,” a term to which I have objected many times before, but it will be okay if Keith wants to use it once in a while.

Nathan deferred to Lulu. “You go ahead, Mom, I’m going to follow the kids out to the river with my pole.” So he grabbed his fishing pole and a can of worms and ran off after Blue and the kids.

I was surprised to see that in addition to the carpentry Thomas had done on two houses he had set up a concrete slab appropriate for a hay truck to back into the barn to fill the lofts on both sides, and he’d put a regulation hoop at one end. Thomas could hold his own, even seven inches shorter than Keith and Lulu was a tenacious fighter for rebounds and grabbing at the ball when I tried to dribble and blocking my shots. We played several games to twenty-one, resting and drinking the cool aid Jameson brought between games. Maybelle and Loretta watched the last of the games from mini bleachers Thomas had set up.

From where we sat resting afterward, we could see Blue coming out of the woods ridden by Nathan and followed by the two others on foot. Robert had a large catfish hanging from his right hand as he ran, with Sadie hanging on to his left carrying the pole in her left. We were at the stable when they got there with Sadie yelling out, “Robert caught a cat—a big one.”

Nathan was down unbridling Blue and brushing him down swiftly and then as we all watched he let all three of the horses back out to the pasture after giving them each a handful of oats.

“Now,” he said, talking to Robert. “Let me show you how to clean a catfish,” which he proceeded to do adeptly, throwing the waste in a compost pile and handing the washed fish to Lulu to take to the house. Then Robert and Nathan did some one-on-one, with Sadie grabbing a whistle, obviously having been used for this purpose before; she blew it for fouls almost indiscriminately to the complaints and hilarity of the three of them.

Jameson scolded, “Sadie, yous put dat thang away, girl. Me un Nathan gunna play you an Robert.” Now that was worth watching the way Sadie and Jameson fought each other for the ball, with Nathan and Robert well matched—both about the same height. Finally the adults followed Maybelle and Loretta to the house to further the progress on the meal, but not before each of us was swelled with pride at respective entries in this contest.

“That’s how the game should be played.” It was Keith’s comment.

Thomas agreed, “Basketball is a great game that way. Individual efforts are on display even in a team sport.”

I was quickly out of range of Keith and Thomas’s conversation, and into Lulu and Maybelle’s ecstatic exclamations of how much Sadie and Nathan loved having Robert entering into everything with them. When the kids had finally washed up and walked on through the living area to their gaming and TV room, Robert stopped in front of the large portrait of Danni. I was a little apprehensive, but Sadie, aware of him lingering, came back to stand next to him looking at the painting. Finally she just said, “She was my best friend.” She took his hand and led him into the gaming room where the ruckus began again.

Our dinner was late—more of an early supper—because the roasts took longer than Thomas and Keith had expected, but it was wonderful. I have never been much of a vegetarian, but these women could make almost anything taste delicious. And the parsnips, Jameson’s specialty, were amazingly good.

After dinner we adults sat around the living area interacting as if it were a family reunion. I think Keith’s having read Ricky’s account of life on the farm prepared him for the evening. I mentioned something to the effect of Blue Moon having to be safely separated from Willow before long to which Jameson responded quickly.

“I been wundrun when we should cut im. Pretty soon I spect.”

Sadie came running, “No, no, Grandpa! No.”

Nathan was there too with a little calmer but very forceful voice, “He’s the future of the farm, Gramp. He’s a gunna make us rich.”

“He would, I think, Jameson. Danni showed me his pedigree and if he runs like I think he will, he’s a billion-dollar horse.”

“Well, I guess we better get working on the double-fenced paddock don’t you think, Nathan?” Thomas laughed, but added, “I’m serious, Nathan, let’s lay out where we want it tomorrow.”

Robert stood between Sadie and Nathan taking it all in with great interest.

Jameson concluded the conversation, “Well, we not cut im den.”

The kids had gone back into their game room and were having all the fun Robert could ever have imagined. Eventually it was Keith who rose and stated that however enjoyable and he did hate to leave, that we must.

“Oh, no!” Thomas and Lulu spoke as one. “You’re staying here tonight. It’s Saturday and there’s no coaching tomorrow. The women can go to church, and we can lay out the future of Howard Farm.”

Keith fumbled his response, and the entire room began explaining how they had changed the bedroom that had been Danni and Ricky’s into the guest room. The Taylors slept in the new bedroom now, etc.

The kids had heard the raised volume and tempo of conversation and came running in to demand Robert stay with them at the Howard house.

So Keith relented, beginning to state that if it would be alright with Marylou... at which point Robert informed everyone that it would be because she had slept with his dad last night. That was followed by an embarrassed laugh echoed around the room, with the embarrassment waning faster than the laughter. So we stayed.

After Keith and I had gone to bed in the four-poster bed that had been Danni and Ricky’s, holding each other and laughing, he asked, “Did you know that Thomas had been all state in both basketball and

football when he played high school ball in a quadruple-A school district in Tennessee?

“Did he receive a scholarship to play at the college level?”

“Yes. But he refused it.”

“Refused it? Why?”

“I don’t really know. Lulu, I think. He said it had to do with his uncle and Lulu’s father having been on scholarship and been killed one night after a game for celebrating.”

“Oh,” I said, remembering what Loretta had told me. “Keeping a low profile, huh?”

“Yes. I’ve warned my players to always act like you’ve done it before. I think things are getting better though, don’t you?”

“My life is the best it’s ever been.”

He paused then reaching over to wrap his arms around me, “I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy just to be alive. And Robert is on cloud nine with the kids over in the other house.”

We were on the same cloud; it turns out it’s a big cloud, but we were tired and fell to sleep in no time.

Some months later; Keith was on a road trip with his team, so I had driven up to Cincinnati to pick Robert up from school. I was talking idly with Jeanie who waited for a couple kids she would be taking back to her daycare when I saw Robert striding out the door surrounded by classmates. They were all laughing at something he had said. Just the sight of it made both Jeanie and I laugh. Robert broke away from the others and rushed over to give me a big hug. He was taller than I now.

“I forgot you’d be picking me up today,” he emoted.

“I almost did too. I was afraid I might be late.”

“Where’s the Escalade?”

“Around the corner. There were a lot of cars ahead of me today.”

“Fridays,” he said.

“What time’s your dad’s game today?”

“Later,” he said. “They’re seeded seventh in the San Fran section of the tournament.”

“Oh yeah,” I said as we began winding our way to the freeway.

“Are we stopping by the castle on the way south?”

“Yeah. I thought we would in case you wanted to pick anything up... or drop anything off. You’ll probably want to change clothes.”

He was quiet but thoughtful for a while which always made me wonder what was going on in that head of his. Finally he broke the silence with, “I love living in Kentucky. It’s like nowhere else.” I could see him scanning the area—the green fields, white fences, and grazing horses. “This drive down 27 just makes me feel good.” There was another pause. “And Cynthiana—it’s a dumb name, but I like Cynthiana. I like telling my friends, ‘I live in Cynthiana,’” spoken with an atypical cockiness, “like I’m some kind of a big wheel,” he laughed.

“You are a big wheel,” I reacted, laughing with him.

“Not yet,” he replied, “but I will be.”

He caught me looking over at him questioningly which made him laugh all the harder. He was always good natured and laughed a lot, but today he seemed even more giddy than usual.

After we got back on the road, and we were well past Paris, he had been silent about as long as Robert does silence. “Ruffian,” he said, clearly not concerned if I heard it, but it wasn’t spoken to me.

I looked over at him and then after a bit I asked, “What was your impression the first time we ever went down to Howard farm?”

He just stared at me for too long giving me an eerie feeling. Then he looked away at the rolling hills. We had gone through Winchester by now and were heading down 89 when he finally responded, “You know, there’s something about women—not all women, but some women; I’m getting so I can tell the difference; I can pick ‘em nearly every time. Like grandma, probably Elain, Danni, and you...” An

unusually long pause was followed by, “and Sadie.” He looked over at me again and said, “It’s in my blood; I just can’t help it.”

We laughed as hard as I’ve ever laughed; we were still laughing as we drove into Howard farm. And there came Sadi out to meet us, all smiles, bubbling with enthusiasm; and Jenni was bouncing right behind.

END

About the Author

Russell F. (Fred) Vaughan brings a unique blend of expertise and experience to the pages of *The Ruffian Syndrome*. He became immersed in the world of Thoroughbred horse breeding and racing, when his wife decided to turn their interest in raising horses into a winning enterprise. She rose to prominence as an award-winning trainer at Longacres Racetrack, a story celebrated in the biography *They Called Her Wonder Woman*. Together, the Vaughans were among the leading breeders in Washington State and were the leading owners at Longacres for several consecutive years, leaving a legacy in Washington State's racing community. They served on the Washington Horse Breeders Select Sales Pedigree Committee.

In parallel with his horseracing experience, Fred pursued a distinguished scientific career. He had earned his degree in physics from the University of Washington. And for over 30 years, he contributed to the groundbreaking advancements in electronics research at the Boeing Aerospace Company. He earned accolades for his technical presentations at conferences and patented parallel computing methodologies that were allowed in 51 countries.

In retirement, his expertise and curiosity have led him to explore a variety of intellectual pursuits. A passionate writer, he has published scientific works, novels, and articles that reflect his curiosity about the intersections of science, history, and the human experience. His essay on skeletal developments in the Thoroughbred horse, was published in *The Washington Horse* and elsewhere; it employed his scientific insights with his knowledge of the equestrian world.

Today, Fred resides in the greater Seattle area with his wife. They reflect on their rich history in racing and continue to explore creative and intellectual pursuits. They take considerable pride in their two accomplished children and the legacy they built both on and off the track.