

The Ruffian Syndrome

by Russell F. Vaughan



remembering a time...

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Contact the author at: fred@vaughan.cc
Visit fred.vaughan.cc



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Seattle, U.S.A.

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 Longacres 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 the local 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.

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 in 2023. 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 of trust between horses and their human handlers must remain unchanged.

But, as elsewhere in our society wealth has all but eliminated the small-time practitioners—horsemen who bred, trained, and raced home-bred horses. Breeders Cup fees have weigh heavily on these sources of Cinderella horses who won major races. 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 energy 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 trauma. 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.

Summary Description

A singular event witnessed by Ricky and Danni at Longacres racetrack as teenagers affected them profoundly. It was some fifty years later that Danni (now Danielle O'Neill), who had recently retired from her career as a tenured professor of animal science, decided to re-establish contact with Ricky. She had come to realize that the novels she has enjoyed reading over the years had been written by that same Richard O'Hare.

Despite his success Richard had become jaded whereas Danielle's vitality hadn't waned despite a life filled with disappointments. Together they re-

evaluate a shared teenage experience outside a woven wire fence where they witnessed a traumatic event. And they discuss their separated lives thereafter. Ricky retains a sense of having always been outside events looking on to write about them, whereas Danni is vibrant with the realization of having lived through trying events. She convinces Ricky to re-engage, return with her to her roots, to enjoy the life in retirement they should have shared for decades. They fixed up her family farm, acquired horses to ride, and enjoyed her long-standing connections in the Kentucky where she had grown up.

The horse that Danni purchased had been rejected from the racetrack because her unbreakable will had become a liability. In getting to know Will Of Steel, Danni embraces the challenge of training her to race. The bad disposition was transformed into an amazing will to win, bringing both Danni and Ricky back into the penumbra of thoroughbred horse racing which was where they had met as teens. Her professional background informed innovative methods of training that would reduce the likelihood that brilliant racehorses like Ruffian and Will Of Steel would break down as too many great horses do. Ricky had become enticed to write about Danni's amazing life of overcoming traumatic experiences and her discovery and development of a great racehorse.

Ultimately, Ricky and Danni are most completely defined by their legacy and the influence they leave behind.

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.

Preface

The Ruffian Syndrome came about because the author told his friend Patrick Finney about an event that had occurred fifty years earlier at Longacres racetrack. The situation was one of those in which you are aware of a willful disaster in the making and are helpless to do anything about it. You think about it off and on for the rest of your life; it affects your life choices. Patrick suggested it was a story that needed to be written.

Describing the event required some background, much of which was personal first-hand experience on the backside of Longacres racetrack either helping or waiting for my wife, Kay whose training career was taking off by then. We were in our mid-thirties at that time but were aware of the younger set, some of whom were grooms or riders like those Kay employed. Our children (Nola and Sean) were younger yet, but already participants in that way of life. Naturally Kay's and our children's memories inform this account.

Kay has proof-read the manuscript for authenticity and Nola has made valuable contributions in explaining how the story needed some, even if seemingly minor, interaction as a basis for Ricky's and Danni's lasting romantic connection. This gave rise to the incident of the bird flying into the window at the track kitchen. She also informed me of how two women (Marylou and Roberta) could share a very close relationship without sexual overtones; it's a woman thing, I'm told. She seems to have accepted my fixes in that regard. There were other aspects she thought needed fixing for credibility that hopefully I've fixed.

Chapter One: Danni McGee

Danielle O’Neill. That was the name beside a faceless icon that had just popped up in a Facebook message. The name, accompanied by only a casual “Long time no see” rang no bells. Of course, at my age bells don’t often ring anymore. With the tap of my finger, I deleted the message and left the page.

As I rose from the chair in this, my makeshift bedroom office, pondering breakfast options, another ding echoed to halt my departure. The screen now indicated: “Facebook message from Danielle O’Neill.” Puzzled, I hesitated, then settled back into my chair, clicking the notification. It transferred me to my Facebook page where a new message awaited, this time with a woman’s face, accompanied by the words, “I used to be Danni McGee.”

What had I been to Danni McGee, and what might she have been to me? The name spun around my mind, tugging at the edges of memory. What, if any, connection might we have once shared? I pushed the thought aside as I wandered into the kitchen. I was more concerned with how my supposedly ‘impregnable’ Facebook privacy had been breached. I had gone to the page earlier just to see if I had heard back from my plumber, not to socialize.

The coffee pot had filled after having been set in motion a while ago. I poured a cup after dropping a slice of bread into the toaster. Jennifer, my dog since Dad died, stared up at me expectantly. So I got a remaining half can of smelly dog food out of the fridge and mixed it with her kibble. I sprinkled some warm water over it the way Dad had told me she liked it.

All the while I’m thinking: “Danni McGee?” Had I ever known a woman named McGee or O’Neill, and if so, when and where? And, of course, why? I buttered and jammed my toast, still wondering who this woman could be.

I’ve known quite a few women over my long life, but I couldn’t remember any Danni McGee for the life of me. And though I still didn’t recognize the name or the depiction, her insistence felt significant. And, 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; an echoing “*They’re off!*” could be heard bellowed by a racetrack announcer over the speakers somewhere a long time ago. I remember where it was; it

isn't there anymore. There are a lot of racetracks that aren't; that particular one was Longacres—the only one I've ever known.

Danni McGee, yeah. Cute girl—pretty little thing really—petite. But she radiated a wild defiance that dominated her immediate surroundings. Her hair, untamed, and frizzy, could barely be held in a ponytail. She would have been in her middle teens back then. An undeniable cuteness was a facet I seemed overly eager to acknowledge, as if to mask some deeper significance.

The bell that had finally rung kept ringing from those many odd years ago. We were watching a horse race through a chain-link fence on the backside of that long-gone racetrack. Danni was right beside me already hollering; her fingers gripping the steel wire like a bird's feet clamped on a branch, its wings flapping. She bounced up and down like a kid on a pogo stick as soon as the horses broke from the gate. I hadn't been aware that she was there beside me until her annoying ruckus began. The horses hadn't yet reached their stride or approached the section of the track between the half mile and three-eighths poles where I had chosen to 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, Molly O'Mar 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 her loud noises and the thundering hooves, as I glanced 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 on 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 conniving jockey 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 the 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 in actual fact ‘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 boasted 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, gone to collect her winnings from whomever had placed a bet for a minor. It felt like a bird, having flown into a window, had straightened her feathers and flown away.

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 shedrow, 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 his 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, age cracks showing as bright scratches in the dark room.

I activated the large screen that I had bought shortly after relocating here. It was 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 from nearly fifty years ago. Having known a young person, one can still see them in the older person, but knowing only the older person, one cannot visualize the brash 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 before she had.

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 improbably bright sunshine; I was sure I had heard it raining in the night, but it was bright 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 us. 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 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 posed and was 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.

When I stooped to scoop up Jenni’s poop, a little bird flew up and hit the window, flying into reflections of a ‘real’ world, I thought. I read somewhere that windows are the number one killers of songbirds in America. Cats are a distant second, but bird flu is probably catching up. This sparrow had broken its neck; I stroked the soft downy feathers on the breast of the lifeless bird as I held it before dropping it into the bag and tying it shut. Sometimes hitting a window just knocks the wind out of them; they sit on the ground recovering for a few minutes before flying off—that is, if a cat doesn’t find them first.

But Jenni was pulling on the leash impatiently, having no tolerance for this inner dialog. So I dragged her back into the inner darkness from whence we had come. I attribute the darkness and gloom to Jenni because Dad had insisted 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 are all commercial contacts relevant to getting rid of this house so I can get back to the life that had gotten interrupted when I came to take care of my dad.

There are two Richard O'Hare fan club pages maintained by my publisher that probably do have followers. I've never looked at those pages. I have this one set it up to preclude well-wishers. There is no personal information on my page, and I have never made a post. I use it for necessary messaging; if I get a

message, it better be relevant to getting rid of this house. So I wondered how Danni made it through the filter. Who tipped her off or could she have figured it out on her own? She has been the lone exception; no harm done.

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 was a bit insincere. It wasn't as though I hadn't thought about Danni McGee and wondered what she had done with her life in all these fifty years.

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. A bird flying into the window at the track kitchen. 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 had been 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 now in her mid-sixties, was 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, selecting a free table with an unobstructed view of the doorway. At 12:14 a tan sedan parked in the only remaining spot in front of the restaurant. A woman emerged from the car; her confident stride caught my eye immediately. It was Danielle, her frizzy black hair, I remembered from so long ago, was shorter now and laced with silvery gray. It was very stylishly swept back, catching sunlight with each buoyant step. I had never quite forgotten the sculpted contours of her face, accentuated now by age in the sunlight. My fascination with its subtle olive hues was undiminished by the years.

As she approached, I rose for a restrained embrace. I sensed an olfactory aura of feminine freshness, a scent presenting a delicate blend of floral notes so foreign to my current monastic lifestyle. A revised impression of Danielle O'Neill? Cute has nothing to do with it. Cute simply didn't do her justice—neither now, nor as Danni back then. This was a woman of profound beauty.

Pulling out her chair, I felt unexpectedly awkward; it scraped along the floor with a screeching sound. She smiled graciously, casually shrugging off her coat, which I then draped over the chair. No sooner had I taken my seat opposite her than she unfolded her menu, as though scanning for a culinary delight that Tobago's modest offerings were unlikely to provide. I found myself captivated, observing her with the same intensity that had gripped me awaiting her online messages just yesterday. I watched and waited, as if for the wavering dots to solidify into the text of a next message. I found myself studying her expressions as intently as I had watched those dots yesterday, waiting for what might be coming next.

“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 whatever memory she had of me as a teen.

“It was 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 a 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 muscular kid who had stood by the fence above me all those years ago.”

The “muscular 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, incredulous. “You did,” she said. “You still are.”

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

“Have you never 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 ‘muscular’ 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. “I think it would have changed my life.” She paused, with me still speechless before she continued. “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, as I looked out the window now in the direction she was looking, but she opened that topic up 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 doubted my own sincerity because I don’t have any idea what an 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 track kitchen and had wished I had watched it alone—why I had wanted to watch Gold Run alone. I wondered if 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 with emphasis, “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 questions 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 anything because she survived and won anyway.”

Still on the defense for whatever reason, I said, “He had an organization of people surrounding her all the time to keep tabs on her. And what about her owners and all the money that had already been bet on her whether she ran or not? Thousands of people from everywhere were at that track, millions had

bet on her and watched. Whitely was supposed to scratch her in the morning just because she didn't sleep too well? Can you even imagine doing that?"

"They tried to save her, but they couldn't," she continued, ignoring every excuse I had made for Whitely, 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."

That was a dumb and cruel thing to have said. I knew it immediately.

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. "I've pretended not to know; I realize that I've done that. Haven't I?" She sat back down to

hear me out. “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 did finally sit 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 exclusively 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, or one’s father’s 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 here 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'd finally expired, I had been working on the novel whose progress had been interrupted by his phone call requesting my help during this morbid ordeal. And 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 an oily workbench—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 had 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, 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 after every work. 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 a 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."

"Maybe, but it was real."

"Reality requires more than a vague memory," I chuckled.

"No," she negated again, 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 hard steel of 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 Smithsonians 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 of the books 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 a 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 comparison, disarming that aspect of my comment, of my nature, a first nudge 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 memories.

“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 other 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 racehorse?”

“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 Pooh’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 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?” She paused as wrinkles rose 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, do I want to know about you?” I paused. “Yes, I really do.”

“Well, I’m really not very interesting, I’m afraid. There’s a lot of black type in my pedigree but they’re not stake 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 an old white man, but I don’t think you will find any racism in me. There are the undeniable facts of my being more attracted to the beauty of a woman than her brilliance. So I’ll confess to having been shallow and objectifying women in my past behavior; I’ll admit to having 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 always knew that you weren’t racist. And my being black but light is just a fact that matters to me less than it did. White men in my pedigree all 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.”

“As far as the women in your life were concerned, I had kind of figured that out.” She laughed, adding, “I have actually been very of jealous.”

She jumped up, dropping Jenni to her surprise, then ran over to fall into the couch beside me and gave me a kiss. 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 gaping 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 when he just walked away...” In my mind I heard On The Road whinny again as I finished my sentence with “and never looked back?”

“I don’t think you walked away because you were tired of horses or horse racing, not of On The Road. I walked away too but not because I was tired of horses. I barely knew you at that time, but I regretted that I hadn’t run after you and followed you wherever you would go. It was my fantasy. When I did finally leave, it was because things had changed—in how my favorite horses were being treated—more like poker chips. And in some weird way, it was because you weren’t there anymore to stand by me at the fence. We can look back together now, Ricky. We’re together at last, aging adults to be sure, but we have your words to express how we felt back then and how we feel now about all that isn’t right in the world.”

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. I had words and couldn’t do as well.

“It is more than a mutual interest and endeavor that attracts people to each other. There’s something chemical 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, getting to know you now, I do know that I need you, Ricky... and you need me.”

I could still feel the poetic tingle of her kiss and sensed where this might go—‘two paths diverged in a yellow wood,’ but had converged again and that seemed now to be making ‘all the difference’.

“There is bodily appeal where words become unnecessary, she continued. Your physique attracted me when I first saw you; you were six-foot-whatever and all man already. I thought I was ready to run away with you to anywhere. That probably wouldn’t have lasted forever, but it was real, and it wouldn’t be honest to discount it. It’s just a fact that I wanted you back then; I don’t know why, but I did – and I do now. Sexuality wanes at our age, but it still exists. That has been the reason for aspects of my behavior over the years that I’d refused to admit until I was embarrassed by it. At our age we hide these basic desires beneath a whole lot of our 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. And I knew that you did give a damn and I loved you for it. Do you remember the time you picked up that bird that had flown into that big window up at the track kitchen? You got up from your breakfast and went out to pick it up.”

I did remember. I’ve remembered it off and on through the years, most recently just yesterday. “I held it in the palm of my hand while it was getting its breath,” I said.

“Yes, and Riley came out, laughing and tried to grab it away from you to give to a cat that had run over to get it just as you scooped it up. He yelled, ‘It’s just a god damned bird, Ricky. Give it to the cat.’ Do you remember what you told him?”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “I said, Riley, that’s just a god damned cat.”

Danni laughed with me. “I pleaded with you not to give it to the god damned cat. Remember?”

“Yeah, you came over and placed your hand on mine, covering the bird. I’d never felt a girl’s hand on me that so electrified my being. And when you lifted your hand, the bird flew away. It felt like a magic trick.”

“Yep,” she said, all smiles. “That was the beginning of you and me. And for the last couple of decades I’ve 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. That was ever since I found out that you are Richard T. O’Hare. I want to be the last of those women in your life.”

As she hugged me to her tightly, I looked up into that spider web across the room. Maybe ‘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’ve contacted you.”

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

“Consenting adults at last,” I said somewhat frivolously I suppose.

She stood up immediately, Jenni dropping to the floor. Danni obviously had been offended at my comment. As she stepped away toward the kitchen she said, “Consent isn’t an on-off switch indicating biological receptiveness.”

I sat in silence; I was stunned by the force of her reaction.

She opened the cupboard, found a cup, and poured herself some coffee. She had gained control of her response and her new surroundings. “Do you want a cup?” she asked.

“I have a cup around here somewhere,” I said.

She ignored my statement, got another cup out of the cupboard, and filled it to the brim. As she brought the cup over, handed it to me, and proceeded to the recliner, she kept speaking, “Consent is just intellectualized approval of an equally intellectualized self-reflective intent.” Jenni stood in the middle of the room, looking first to Danni, then to me, as confused as I was. “Biological urges are undeniable, but our intentions and our consenting to them is totally under our control. It isn’t giving into, it’s committing to, a relationship.”

This would definitely not be a one-night stand; I would either consent to her high road or continue my downward decline. I knew that for sure.

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 a female cheetah having to run the equivalent of seventy miles before she is ready to mate had kept me from sleeping longer. It has never been easy for me to dismiss such metaphors and analogies; they are my stock in trade. Danni has run her seventy miles—and so now have I.

The novel for which I was on contract and had intermittently written one paragraph or two at a setting was now completely boring to me in comparison to Danni’s life story. Thus, the novel proceeded to slide back into the past. I had reiterated too many times in my mind what Danni had related to me in the hours before we had finally 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 will always be 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 had always been called, occurred during the 1958 Spring Meet at the Keeneland racetrack. She had 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, 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 his operation for which no duty was beyond her capabilities that she and her husband’s business became a very prosperous partnership. Danni was a product of that partnership.

“Milly had been born and raised on a small farm a few miles further west of Keeneland. Her father had been 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 was 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 would tell anyone interested that he felt way more honorably American about his situation than Thomas Jefferson could have. Theirs was true love.

“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

being ‘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 own hometown she was not just ‘accepted’, her personal charm made her welcome anywhere.

“Danni was born in 1959, 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 does she hale from Lexington, Kentucky, she was born and remains 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 suddenly took on the bright yellowish tint of 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 said, “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 coffee?” I asked.

“Yes, of course I drink coffee. 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 horseman. I did express my feelings as far as valuing you higher than the entire Keeneland Sales revenue. I don’t know exactly how much that’s worth, but whatever it is, I value you a lot more than that. Does that work as my defense?”

“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 immediately stopped laughing, 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 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 maybe for Johnny O.

Time just kept on ticking away like the drip drip drip of my faucet that I had never fixed, and the plumber hadn't ever returned my message. But 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. I looked up to the familiar spider web, but it was gone too.

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. There was a name to plug into each hole. I was getting to know the 'tiny' girl who had watched a disaster in the making right before our eyes and I liked her a lot.

She had a few photos in her purse—not many, but enough that with her commentary it gave me a glimpse of the personality of Mildred 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 or trying to fix anything. 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. 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 extending 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 many 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 that water would. Milly knew why the ceiling of a 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 but on the other side of the Kentucky river. There 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 larger thoroughbred breeders who may have 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 had sent Daniel to ride over to the Howards to secure a nurse mare. While at the farm he noticed Maybelle helping with the arrangement. 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 until 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 even if Kentucky wouldn't.

“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 their little farm between Pisgah and Zion Hill closer in to the Keeneland track. That is where Danni's mother Mildred (Milly) was born. When rent on the farm was raised for an unexplained reason, they moved back to the Howard farm. This wasn't until 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 war 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 a distaff name if his pedigree, his mother having been a Clay, after that revered ‘great compromiser’ who had preferred being right to being president. She was proud of her son who was as generous and high born as any person in Kentucky back then. He was determined but not belligerent. He wouldn’t back down if he knew that he 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 those first days following our fifty-year hiatus. I guessed, if my accepted responsibility in this emerging relationship was to be writing her story, I had better start at the beginning. So that was a start. But more than the mere start of a story, I visualized a DNA mapping of her genotype expressed all these generations later as the phenotypical beauty and behavior of the 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’d heard in this house in over fifty years. 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’s 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 in lining you up for the select sale,” I responded, “with 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 any 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. 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, not mine.” Then after a pause. “You must be convinced that I’m related to your friend Sam McGee?”

“Nah. Just a bit of fun; he was just an artifact in a far-fetched yarn about the Klondike I happened 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’d say that yours is a pretty minimalist view of existentialism. You make me wonder what you might consider to be 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 then as she left the room with Jennifer following, the echoes of, "I *always* wanted you instead" pulsed 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."

"Yes, of course. I crave them." 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 liked you fine, but 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 on whose ‘romance’ I would be?”

“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 and late 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. Of course, 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 was a dumb kid—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 be watching what I thought might happen in a crowd of people. I had watched Ruffian break down when I was in a crowd up in the kitchen and a guy can’t cry in a crowd in the kitchen at a racetrack. And when starting the bell rang and you started yelling, I was totally surprised. I looked down and there you were and the only stupid 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 boobs, and I was proud of them!” 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 whomever else I might have had it with. I did, okay? 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 Danni McGee puzzle. All she would say 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 my mom 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 lot more discrete about it than I was. But that was the situation that had me backing off of 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' or 'dark' and I hadn't been 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 sometimes—besides talking with him about the horses too much."

"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 information. "How long ago?"

"A long time now." 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 uh,” she shook her head. “But after she considered her job done.”

“You were an O’Neill by then?”

“I was an unmarried O’Neill before that; we didn’t get married till later.”

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 but 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 full of pride in the dog paddler I had brought home for her. “Dad heard her moan as he was tacking up a horse and came running; he took her to a 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 gramma 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 gramma Sadie was there; she stayed in bed some days, but sometimes she cooked. I don’t think she liked me very much, but gramma 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 recuperating racehorses. These winter holidays with one’s breath hanging in the air like a cloud or one’s tongue sticking to white frost on a windowpane 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, a name that 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 constitucionals while you are reliving my life, but I think she’d like us more involved.”

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; some of the garage doors were open with no room inside for the cars that lined the street. There were 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 just 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 do not have 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 using 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, about whom I've been obsessed ever since, 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. He 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 with belts around their knees. 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 laughing 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 I mean, ‘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 reveal nothing that’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 on autopilot as 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 organized 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 befitting those afraid of demanding more, or at least that was how I believed it to have been. And it had continued almost without interruption 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, the soft landing of Surveyor 1 in 1966, and the successful orbit insertion of Lunar Orbiter in 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 anymore and the beginning and all the rest was finally 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 allure 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 my last year of living there, but I had never seen 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 and got lost 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 disappointing proof that I hadn’t 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 and laid them back into the basket. 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, who knew that Riley’s friends probably wouldn’t be good help. His son, maybe, but that was it for the charity, and I was not to hang around their shed row. So I sat around on the guinea stand reading Dick Francis novels, watching workouts, or up in the kitchen eating waffles until a trainer, Jack Winlock asked if I needed a job. I worked for him till the event at the fence. 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, which may have included the ‘mad bomber’—I never checked the dates to see whether he would have been there when I was. I tutored some students, but never figured out why I didn’t stand out in math more than I did, but there were girls who thought I deserved a larger role than tutoring math, so I took on that extended role and dropped out of school.

Cramer and I had become friends my senior year of high school. He was saner than Riley and had some intellectual interests I respected and shared; he was into physics and philosophy. He relegated mathematics to the role of the language for doing physics which seemed like the right perspective to me at the time. 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, rooming with Cramer. I will always refer to my alma mater as 'Wazzu', even after it outgrew its image as a cow college. It tainted my degree as a philosopher.

"So what do you do with a degree in philosophy from Wazzu? 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 a lot better than the minimum wage you were getting before.

"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 loo 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 in the black hole.

“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?

“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 thing 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 with 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, I pleaded.”

“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 isn’t Malibu. It’s just 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 various 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's side of a passing pickup flipped me an angry finger and bright red fingernail. 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 the 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 I, 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 some new Malibu apartment; this was totally new.

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...or a naked painter for that matter. Groom, maybe—once, but 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 the blue moon of Kentucky. Neil Armstrong didn't go there to farm, did he? Or was that just my father talking.

I could tell that she was concerned about me and my apparent reluctance to embrace 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 would weigh heavily on her at this point; it should—it would on me, 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, floorboards 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 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. “I think it still runs. Would you check whether it still has fuel and oil. You maybe ought to check before you 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 out.”

So my first assignment on the 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 the battery got charged, 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, "I think I might just enjoy my life on this farm; it's an experience I never had growing up." Then, "Quite frankly, I never missed."

"We're good together," she said. We laughed as though it was funny.

"Yeah," I seconded as we walked back into the house with our farm dog right with us. I had left the pickup running. 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'd 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 ride 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 passenger's side of the SUV and shoed 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 to help with anything."

"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. And 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 the words ‘post hole digger’ and ‘tamping bar’ that you’ll find in the tool shed will become familiar as well. Post holes don’t dig themselves,” she said. “Oh... and you had 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 now fell squarely into the category of flirting without consequence.

“You bought two pair,” I said but she ignored me..

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, and a heavy bar with a flat end whose function I conceived as what Danni had called a "tamping bar".

Proud of my own initiative, I decided to drive the rental out into the tall grasses of the field to the offending post and to 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. And her observation, "Post holes don't dig themselves" I had found amusing.

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 fun. 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; it was more of a learning experience for me than a necessity to contribute. 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. He had copies of some papers he gave her. I saw the eagerness in her eyes as she inspected the papers and was anxious to see how this 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 potent 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 the name. Danni went off of her a time or two, but Danni could have ridden broncos at a rodeo, if she had wanted. 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 jissa 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 ways.” 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 to where her forefinger and thumb could grab the brim of my hat. She pulled it down over my eyes. I opened them to adjust my hat and watch her. Jenni and Bugs still 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,” Danni said as she rose and started running out toward the barn.

Jameson opened a sleepy eye and said, “Go. You go on. Not much left do up derr on de roof. I finish.” He rose slowly then to follow me as I strode on out to the barn.

The sound of a little grain in a bucket was 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 each 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 woods, cardinals tweeting their noisy concern about our passage.

Danni found what had been the trail she had used as a child, considerably overgrown now. 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 their son Daniel to cross over to the Howard farm to secure a nurse mare. He crossed the river here many times 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 as they had forded the river with both her and Danni on horseback. 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 unless we kept a good hold on the reins.

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 up to the Ohio and on down to the Mississippi. 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 is 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.

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.

I'm not indigenous to these parts. I've thought a lot about that sultry day when the three of us sang Gene Autry back into his saddle, laughing with joy. But when Jameson had added the lines about 'longhorned cattle' feeding on 'gypsum weed', I knew it was a private moment for them that went back some sixty or more years. I could sing along to familiar lines like 'back in the saddle' and 'a friend was a friend', but I was just humming along to the tune on the last lines. I did google 'gypsum weed' sometime later and was further amazed. It took me to 'jimson weed' and I found what is almost a treatise on why Gene Autry would coin phrases involving cattle feeding on a poisonous plant, and he clearly did sing the word "gypsum weed" that isn't even a thing. I realized that I was sitting in my office and intellectualizing about what had been a personal moment—that I'd done it to an occasion what wasn't about words at all but a melancholy feeling that belonged to Danni and Jameson.

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 totally different than the one into which I had been born. This was what her life had been growing up. I now realized that the story wasn't to be just about her. She had envisioned it as at a grander scale—like the climate rather than a single hot sultry day. I think whether consciously or not, she saw herself as representative of some kind of Kentucky farm girl. 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 might 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’s 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 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.

"The hundreds of owners of a Limited Liability Corporation that own a single horse are just investors at best, gamblers more likely, but without the perspective of horsemen. 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."

Danni interrupted me saying, "Like Chinook Pass."

"Chinook Pass?" I was confused.

"Yeah," she said. "The only Washington bred horse to ever win an Eclipse Award. I watched him win the Longacres Mile in '83."

"Oh. Yeah, well that's the way I see it. I see you 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. I knew that.

When she finally spoke, she said, "Willow needs to run."

I don't know what I had expected in response to my pithy commentary and her memory of an unlikely champion sprinter, but it wasn't that.

“She’s good—really good,” she said with excitement lighting her face. “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. Her question had been rhetorical; she knew I didn’t own her horse. Danni was sixty-five and still figuring out what to do with her life. Stopping her would be impossible—like trying to halt a fast-moving train. I could tell Danni was serious, and when Danni believes in something, 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, that included now the thoroughbred she would train. A matter of temperament.

She 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 a big computer screen again; 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 been for way too long and trying to keep up with this energetic woman who, nearly my age, seems at least twenty years younger. Although I'd been relegated to secretarial chores, she continued to talk openly about the life that I enjoy vicariously. She would respond to my queries even as she scurried around from one task to another. Her mind was occupied on her business but there were words flowing directly from that activity and out of her memory with the spigot turned on. I tried to tread lightly with all my 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 then 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 of the 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 barn.

“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. And Mom couldn’t take it anymore. When I asked her 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 she walked 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 owners licenses and 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 gallop 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 real 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. 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. And 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, let’s 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 her. If she’s well-behaved, then 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. Had he—or I for that matter—been just more heartaches or stepping stones across turbulent waters. Those thoughts weighed 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... I 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 my writing her story was my 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 a part 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'd 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. Willow knows.

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 house to Jameson and his wife?”

“Really?” She beamed, her eyes brightened; 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 gramma 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 had done all that work earlier 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 too, but that’s not why I did it.”

“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 the 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. I was thankful that she had seemed to have forgotten about discussing Johnny O, what she had 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 before going out to the 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 that farm. From there it was a short hop for a runaway kid to tracks up around Louisville. He started out by walking 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 on when to move. After hearing them give him instructions, I'd watch during the race to see if he did what he was told. He always 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. I remember some great stories when I was at Longacres."

"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 is irate. So when Johnny comes back to unsaddle after the race, the trainer demands an explanation: 'Why didn't you drive through that hole when it opened up?' Johnny looked the trainer in the eye and said, 'Sorry, sir. But that hole was going a lot faster than your horse can run.'

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

"It didn't sit well. 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 and 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 you and he are at that stage of your lives."

"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 as a two-year-old. 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 Farm 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 eying 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 weren’t even sixteen.”

“I was too sixteen! 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 the X-rays to him, but as it turns out that damned Riley had previously told his pop 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," and 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 a race her new owners entered her in 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 stupids—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 laugh when she said, “I remember crying in the movie theatre watching Black Beauty. Real life was a lot worse than that.”

“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 before starting 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, Mom 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 you 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 didn't back off this time. 'Fool me once...' that kind of thing.

"Then... Horses and riders crashed like dominoes, a thunderous tangle of limbs and screams. God, it was awful. I can't forget 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."

Danni 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 her. I had needed the break; it was too intense. I had been urging her 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 read 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 were settled into the couch finishing the scones, 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—right after you left, by the way. 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 about 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 revised 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 rather than heading south so we could take 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’ one day.

“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 the women who you’re afraid might show up carrying AR-47s, I’m not telling you about it.” She laughed.

“Nah; that story is just my egocentric 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 gramma 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 gramma 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 tend 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 Goald 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 you to find out about all this ever since I received that Facebook 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 in the hospital parking lot. At sunset 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 was 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 right in front of Willie. He looked as if he’d 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 grandma 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 grandma 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. 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 the racetrack 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 the much 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. For your information, Amanda, my very first and only previous wife, and I were in fact divorced many, many years ago.” After correcting her, I 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 does not have anything to do with finances. I love you; you're my knight in shining armor. 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, with no interest in ancient Egyptian religion.

At the GoTime station I turned off toward 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 at 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. Or underestimate any of his kindliness.

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 was 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, that 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 Kennedydale

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 too, even over an inherited single story roman brick castle—a 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 to bring it off 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 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—that was, what, eighty-nine or ninety? 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 early 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? When his horse went down and he'd broken a collarbone or incurred some other more serious injury, his response was to pull himself up and get on his private airplane to fly to another track to do it all over again—same day. He's a legend—hence the 'Sir' before his name.”

“Sounds like Johnny,” she said, “but usually Johnny couldn't pull himself up and he didn't have an airplane.” We laughed at the dark humor 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 race tracker disasters. But I hadn't found the novels of Richard T. O'Hare yet.

“Jane Douglas had started training at Longacres before the track closed in the fall of ninety-two. I met her because one of her horses had chips in his knee. I was the person you called in such circumstances. So, in addition to operating on Fast Fella, we discussed how she should proceed with him after holding off training him until he healed enough to reevaluate. We had these discussions over lunch a few times even 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 early 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 your 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 Nordstrom’s, specifically for that occasion.”

“Polka dots?” I asked cynically.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I’d been standing in front of you naked. You wouldn’t have noticed.”

“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 – big ones. They were hanging in front of you, exposed like low hanging fruit. With the low-cut of her blouse, you could have reached in there and plucked a cantaloupe.”

“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 in a gruff voice. “With the flourish of your, ‘R-period O-period’.”

“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. It 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 even 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. By then Amanda would have been filthy rich; she had been quite disdainful of the unemployability of a BS in philosophy. With a degree in the budding science of computing, she left me for Microsoft. That was before we had even filed for a divorce and early on at Microsoft. Everyone who worked there back then ended up wealthy and retired early.”

“That’s true,” she said. “All you had to do was buy a few shares of their stock back then. Johnny did.”

“Anyway, for your information, I was never involved with two women at once. My dad would probably have said that my behavior was analogous to a series electric circuit like the old Christmas tree lights 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? Is that what you’re working on in your office? Will you finish it? You really should.”

“It’s crap. You provided me with 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 that too,” I teased, knowing I was still writing the story of Danni McGee.

“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.”

“Danni, I probably shouldn’t tell you this because it no longer makes any difference, but I think it would have made one hell of a difference.”

“Tell me,” she said.

“Well, when you came to that signing, you weren’t naked, but you *were* wearing a polka dot dress. I remember it. And, no, I didn’t recognize you at first when I signed your book, but having written ‘Danni’ made me strangely aware of your being there because after you had walked away and the polka dots were disappearing into the crowd, I recalled the bird, your hand on mine, and that bird flying away. I excused myself immediately, got up and followed you out into that crowd. But I couldn’t find you--the polka dots had totally disappeared. You must have snuck out of the building. So I went back to signing books—and yes, that damned Jennifer.”

“You’re not lying to me now are you, Ricky?”

“No,” I said, wistfully. “It was polka dots. I would have walked out of there with you and there would never have been a Jennifer. But let’s get on with the saga of whatever happened to Danni McGee after that one more major mistake of mine.”

“I love you, Ricky. We really were meant for each other, weren’t we?”

“We are,” I said, accepting her hugs and kisses, “but we’re not done with Danielle O’Neill yet.”

“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 further 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 - usually addressing the knees.

“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 young horses, 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 depth 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 Estill County, Kentucky, connecting to all its other neurons through synapses that fire intermittently. He maintains a link to everything that's going on in this neck of the woods. How he knows without an iPhone is a mystery, but he knows. If he doesn't, he by God will. He talks for a few minutes to two or three people in or around Irvine and then he knows all there is to know throughout Estill County. Tendrils from these local connections reach outward throughout the state and into the Shenandoah, Carolinas, and Tennessee. He's 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 garden over der by da shed. Big garden: 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. Cheap 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 garden 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, the Johnsons aren’t fine. They have their pride. They gave away a horse as useless for which they had reportedly paid a million dollars. Then you come along flaunting your success with her. It’s like rubbing their noses in their inability to recognize a good horse; they’re first-class horsemen. 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 listen 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 who oversee a horse’s eligibility. I know you’re worrying about Johnsons but they’re secondary. There wasn’t any 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’, Danni. I’ll keep my ear to the ground.” I paused in thought. “That doesn’t really make sense, does it?”

So we were business as usual heading toward Tuesday. Jameson and Loretta brought more loads to the old house. Bugs arrived; he and Jenni hit it off, both liking the company. Jameson had rototilled for a garden and Loretta had planted some rows of vegetables with Danni out there helping some.

Every day, Danni either jogged Willow on our makeshift track or took her to the training track for a workout. 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

hay 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 a clever double entendre. It was a nod to the sprinkling of Domino genes spread through his pedigree and the now-debunked theory that led the US into Viet Nam to prevent the first communist domino from falling in Southeast Asia.

Danni interrupted my musing. "Slow down—we're coming up on Veterans Parkway to go around Meadowbrook. Take 64 to the outskirts of Lexington. I'm not sure of the best route through there anymore, but let's stay on 64 until we hit the cloverleaf for 922 South, then take 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!”

The ‘guy’ turned out to be Maynard Johnson, the 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 pets 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, “Oh, 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 addressed his wonderment for me as we walked toward Willow’s assigned stall. “Bug him about it, would you,” she said. “I threw him a little off his publishing schedule. But that was a while back now and he doesn’t have any more excuses.”

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 Willow is indeed something special. Neither he nor I showed any particular interest in each 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 a younger woman who'd watched the whole proceeding.

Before he left, he 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 was just Danni and me.

"You were worried about whether they'd accept Willow with open arms?" she jabbed.

"You lined me up to write the New York Times best seller, 'Sometimes A Thorn Can Be A Fucking Rose'," I jabbed back. "God damn it, Danni. Let it go, would you?"

"No, I won't," she mumbled, as she continued to stroke 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, arrived. "So this is the gal ever one's talkin' bout, huh. She's big. Purty too." Then to Danni, "What's the plan for us 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."

"The surface is good," Jacob promised. "It's 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 her over to the rail, and then galloping till they reached the half-mile pole. There, Willow bolted forward with an explosion of speed that sets great racehorses apart. Jacob was thrown backward for a moment but then settled into the work.

The gentlemen behind us both said "Wow!" as one. The woman had joined them; she was beaming. Danni kept her eyes on Willow, occasionally glancing 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 on this track 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,” Jacob said with his wide grin and awestruck expression. “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’s 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. You yearn for some anticipated event to unfold perfectly, the way you dream it will, but it rarely 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. And Marylou was beaming.

I got our washing-down bucket out of the trailer and helped Danni sponge and scrape water off of Willow. We had an audience now, 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 until she cooled down. “I’d love to,” I said, and ‘love to’ is exactly what I meant, because those who associate in any way with a ‘big horse’ are a very privileged few and they know it. It felt like being trusted with a treasure beyond measure—priceless, almost sacred. I had the key to Fort Knox. It is just a great feeling to be associated with something so special.

As I walked beside her casual stride, I thought of our times with me on Blue and Danni on Willow down by the river and what it feels like to have 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 very directly associated with the best horse in the world. I can feel her wet warmth right beside me, hot when I touch her. That's what racehorse 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 overjoyed 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, squeezing me tight and kissing 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 that her grandfather and she and her parents had perfected over their many years of training to ensure their horses remained sound. Then she began rubbing the cannons and tendon areas with fast up and down strokes. 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. And by God, that's how you do it.

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 palms of one's hands and some concoction of alcohol and a trainer's additional whoopee doo 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. A trainer's palm is perhaps the most vital tool in assessing and maintaining a horse's soundness. 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 moved with a practiced ease around Willow, her fingertips and palms gliding over the muscles in Willow's shoulders, her back, her buttocks, her hocks. She picked up each hind foot, the front of the hoof in one palm, feeling the pasterns and then the frog with the other. Finally Danni forced an uninterested Willow to hold her head against her chest as she stroked the muzzle. Willow was totally disinterested, almost irritated at the interruption from eating hay. The ritual seemed timeless to me, rooted in generations of horse caring people, a testament to their priorities of a horse's well-being over their own convenience.

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, whose quiet persistence had

saved Willow's life 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 Marylou beaming in front of me, I was being playfully urged to come out of retirement and finish a book I had started so long ago that I had forgotten the plot. I had never even given it a title. Now they insisted I tell them what it was all about, and I couldn't even remember.

So I embarrassed Danni by stating that she had sidetracked that effort, 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.

"If Danni McGee isn't worth a novel, I don't know who is," Marylou chimed in, her own pride in Willow unmistakable. Our little crowd whooped it up then for a book about Danni McGee. Danni wasn't really irritated, but she faked it pretty well. I suspect that like me, she was riding a high that nothing could have destroyed.

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... I couldn't shake the feeling that this was only the beginning of something extraordinary.

You know how sometimes people say, 'and that was the happiest moment of my life' and it's just bull shit? Well, this wasn't. I began 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 of all of them, it's just because it's been a year so chock full of the kind 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

Danni stayed true to her word. After dinner at the hotel restaurant, she insisted I take her back to the track. There she bedded down in the hay across from Willow, convinced that her presence was necessary as extra security. Meanwhile, I returned alone to a comfortable bed waiting for me at the hotel.

I was deep in sleep when I was aroused by a knock on my door. Groggy and caught off guard, I made the mistake of opening it just a crack without engaging the latch that keeps it from opening wider. Marylou stood there beaming.

“Hello!” she said pushing the door back in my face before I could react.

Confused, I asked, “Is there a problem?”

“Nope,” she beamed, pushing the door shut behind her. “We’ve just solved it.”

With that, she dropped her robe in a tangled circle around her feet. “We have to work on your writer’s block issue.” There she stood before me, like the Venus di Milo, but more perfect than that... she had arms. Her physique was breathtaking. She was a flawless specimen of femella homo sapiens. The phrase “breasts to die for” crossed my mind before I snapped out of it.

“No, no! That is not a problem you are authorized to solve,” I corrected hurriedly, my voice firm at last, as I stepped back.

Then, as if auditioning for a starring role in the scene she’d witnessed earlier, she leapt on me. Her arms were wrapped around my neck as Danni’s had been earlier, her legs shot out like a pole dancer’s. Suddenly her weight hung on my neck like an albatross. I pulled her arms away, rather terrified. Panic surged. 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, with uncharacteristic resolve, I grabbed her waist and gently pushed her back onto the bed. She seemed momentarily stunned, giving me enough time to grab her robe. I opened it up and held it in front of her, the sleeves readied for her arms.

“Put this back on,” I said, my tone leaving no room for argument. “Leave now, or I will throw you out and call the office if you knock again.”

Her expression shifted from shock to something softer, almost childlike. She slid her arms one at a time into the wrong sleeves, facing me and looking up with an innocent smile. I yanked the robe off and held it out to her again.

“Try again,” I said, irritation creeping in.

This time, she complied by turning to slide her hands into the correct sleeves. Once the robe was on her shoulders, she turned to face me. I adjusted the robe to cover her breasts and pulled the sash tight, tying it in front of her. She looked up at me, her expression now tinged with vulnerability.

“I thought you liked me,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I do like you,” I replied, softening. “We had a wonderful conversation today, but you’re better than this. Go get some sleep.”

As I guided her to the door, she turned one last time, placing a warm hand on my cheek. “Ricky, please write me as a good person in one of your books.” Her tone was earnest.

“I will,” I said, smiling, having seen some humor in this whole situation. “You are now at the top of my good person list.” I had never maintained a ‘good person’ list, but now I had one.

With that, I gently pushed her out the door and secured the lock. I leaned my back against it for a moment totally exhausted. I wandered over to the window and looked out toward the track, my thoughts drifting to all the kids who grew up on and around it. Marylou was one of them, a category unto herself.

The faint but pleasant scent of Marylou’s perfume still clung to the air as I sat down in an overstuffed chair there by the round table in the dark. A distant murmur of hotel activity provided ambiance to the room like a long-forgotten memory. Unfocussed thought, an experience I imagined to be like having suffered a stroke, with inexpressible but overwhelming feelings flooding my mind. A sadness crept in, replacing the earlier euphoria. It was the kind of sadness that feels like a tide, washing over you without warning. I thought of Danni, of her hitch-hiking back to Kentucky from Washington, disillusioned but determined – the way she is. She has stories she refuses to tell until and unless I have unburdened myself of those concerning too casual affairs I’ve had. I haven’t wanted to hear her stories unless she needs to tell them. I certainly never want to express all my own indecencies of which there’ve been too many—or that single too well documented incident. But I should have.

Amanda came immediately to mind. 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 had aligned too precisely with my own. We’d identified each other’s shortcomings, wishing the other would admit and fix them so we could have enjoyed the good times more fully. But neither of us possessed the self-awareness to admit or address a thing.

And the other merely perfect femella homo sapiens, who like Venus di Milos, had 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 flitted in and out of memory, beauty unmatched, but women of unappreciated significance. Retrospect provides a cruel critique of 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 hadn’t been able to recognize 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 an endless supply of lonely-hearts and Heartbreak Hotels, a commodity for dating sites to franchise. My own undirected loneliness had only ever led to more loneliness. I’d never learned to simply ‘engage,’ as Danni puts it, but I think I’m starting to get the hang of it—learning when to engage, and when not to.

I congratulated myself on my handling of the ‘Marylou incident’. She has more on the ball than most of the women I’d known, women with whom I would have reveled in an opportunity like the one she had offered me tonight. I would have snatched it up in an instant; it would have lasted a day or two—a night or two before it was over forever and that would have been that. But tonight I chose differently. I chose Danni.

Jennifer, that poor sad soul so desperate for attention. I can picture her now; she was naked, banging on my hotel room door, screaming for me to let her in. I have never figured out how she had gotten there, how she had even known I would be there. People were peeking from every door down the long hallway, some were yelling at her to quiet down, others laughed, or they shouted lude remarks. Ultimately, I had to let her in, despite already having a woman in my bed. That was my life’s most embarrassing situation and try as I might, it won’t go away.

I grabbed one of those little bottles of booze in the fridge and drank it to drown the recurrent memory. But it still wouldn't go away. 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 from the fridge and drank it as I paced the room, gradually bringing my mind to a standstill. Then slowly I allowed myself to focus on specific positive thoughts.

I thought of Danni sleeping alone in a barn tonight, probably on the bale of straw I sat on watching her rubbing down Willow. The moon is bright enough to cast shadows in her shedrow. Willow probably nickers now and then, aware of Danni's presence. Danni is not the least bit lonely; she is in the middle of her dream. She was a racetrack kid who had been flawed, but not severely—maybe not at all. Empathy had always flowed through her veins even as a kid. She had always had the urge to fix whatever needed fixing, even her own flaws, and the drive 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 don't completely get it, but I feel like I just might beat this aphasia thing yet.

I went back to bed then and fell right to sleep.

Danni woke me with a 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 while 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 I went to the barn, and we walked arm in arm to 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 sign of 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.

As we wound our way single-file through Lexington heading for Howard farm, I was still confused, thinking of Marylou's inexplicable behavior—both last night and this morning. No woman I'd ever encountered in a motel room had ever so totally erased the usual embarrassment when we met again. None of them. Roberta maybe. Is it psychopathic? Singularly unique characters, certainly worth someone more capable than me to explore in fiction. I could not get her insisting on being included as a 'good person' in one of my novels 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, 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 then 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," she said, laughing and clearly aware of what had transpired at the hotel.

"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 needed on a day like yesterday, don't you think? It was..." I paused, looking for a right 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 drove on silently then in our separate vehicles, each lost in our own thoughts, down 89. Miles blurred past as I reflected on all that had transpired including the workout and Marylou’s strange behavior. I had driven this route before, but today it felt different—like I was now connected to the world in a way I had never felt before. Then, we were home with 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 away as the West Coast. So, yeah. We were home, but it felt a little different, even a little better.

Things were a little more humdrum for a while, so that I became a bit confused by what seemed like Danni’s lackadaisical approach to getting Willow ready for a race. Racing Willow had seemed imminent and yet she dallied. The meet was opening in a few days; I knew that Danni wouldn’t enter Willow in a race until she had at least worked out of the gate one time at Keeneland. Nor would she enter her without having worked Willow the distance she would be expected to race. She had often spoken to me with disdain of trainers who did that as having put their horses at risk of serious injury. So one evening I broached the subject to her.

“Just for information,” I ventured 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. Stops?”

“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. What I was trying to come up with was an inoffensive question to resolve my uncertainty with regard to what the hell was going to happen in my dream 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’d 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 was incredulous. “What does the writing of 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, memoirs, 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 you.”

I started laughing and she laughed with me—maybe at me, I couldn’t tell.

“Willow is a character driven novel, Ricky, and you’re expecting a plot driven novel.”

This had turned into the weirdest damn conversation I’d ever had. I kept searching for the elements of her novel and found that Willow’s cannon bones are protagonists. And that made absolutely no sense to me until I stepped back a little. There was a dim quavering light bulb of recognition somewhere way back in my brain as neurons and synapses began the process of forming brand-new paths. 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 with our contrapuntal thoughts, me thinking of her becoming the foremost trainer in the world in developing the fastest, soundest horse with stamina to go any distance. But her refusing to have Willow demonstrate it to the world or force that demonstration to occur on a certain day when a race card 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. That’s 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 Willow can achieve. Willow will be an unheralded Ruffian into old age. And why? Because that’s who Danni is,

who she was bred to be and what she has become. It's where she's been and what she has discovered. That's the character-driven aspect of my story of Danni McGee.

And Ricky? What about Richard T. O'Hare? Would he ever write the perfect unpublished—and in all likelihood unpublishable—manuscript? One that illustrates a full character development of a racetrack ruffian called Danni McGee, and proclaims it to be the perfection of femella homo sapiens in mind and body.

If only he could.

Chapter Thirteen: What Goes Without Saying

If you claim to be busy, you're expected to move something—a shovel, a pitchfork, a pen, a gear shift, even your lips if nothing else. A career requires action—taking responsibility for some physical transition. As the adage goes, 'Idleness is the devil's playground'. Well, maybe, but unless one can refute a statement, it makes no sense to assert it. That's what earned me my bachelor's degree in philosophy; that's what science is all about. Irrefutable statements make no sense at all—they fall into a nebulous category of 'what goes without saying' or more properly, 'what shouldn't even be said', because all such statements are 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.

In our hierarchically organized society, little room is left for introspection. 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 and 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 anxious for a new story line, I was all over it—annoyingly so as it turns out.

I had become a bit jaded with making up story lines for protagonists who were nothing more than the 'pigment of my imagination'—a malapropism of a trite phrase to be sure, but oddly fitting as an analogy to substance of imagined colors. And yes, I know that 'figment' is the proper word in this context, not 'pigment'. I learned this one night when I came home from the track drunk, back when I was grooming at Longacres. My mother stood in her bathrobe with her hair up in curlers and said, "Ricky, I worry about you hanging out

with those people, because there is so much immorality at the track.” I had reacted with, “That’s the pigment of your imagination.” And she responded in her hushed tone, “No, Ricky, the word is figment.” That was the end of that discussion; I had just stalked off to bed. But I looked it up later—she was right about the words, not necessarily about the morality issue. But I didn’t care, and I still don’t. And when I googled it just now, it said: “‘A pigment of your imagination’ is an idiom that means something is not real and only exists in your mind.’ So there is that. In this context the phrase should mean the physicality of an imagined character, which is kind of nice in a way. That may not be exactly what it means, but it’s what I mean by it. Danni is real.

In all honesty, there was never 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 claims that Jack London (now there’s another Jack) had struggled with story lines and bought them from lesser writers—a curious irony, considering his nature. I hadn’t stooped to that; I had chosen a much greater writer from whom to steal a protagonist. Nonetheless, given the prospect of a real live and attractive protagonist of my own generation with a 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 I have 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 represents a generation of kids who had grown up on racetracks when the so-called Sport of Kings was a totally different sort of thing. It's a tragedy really that the sport of Kings has moved away from its traditional roots, 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 achieved in developing the fleetest filly to never have been entered in a race at a recognized track, I sort of relaxed into the sense that it made for her in her role as trainer and for me in my secondary role of recording her refusal to race the greatest racehorse of all time. That may be a little hyperbolic, but Willow is the physical realization of a dream and not just a fleeting whimsical what-could-have-been-if-only counterfactual dream. Danni has reified her dream as objective fact in a racehorse whose training regimen is precisely matched to the skeletal and musculature developments required by the extreme stresses on such a fleet racehorse. Will of Steel has been allowed to revel in her emerging excellence, while an awestruck few of us witnessed her performance, avoiding the 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, reflecting on my latest course correction and unsettling dream, I decided to watch Danni more closely. I wanted to understand more fully the nature of her quest. As usual following dressing and her minimal ablutions, she went out directly to see to Willow. I followed—certainly not surreptitiously. As other than my usual morning routine, she noticed but made no comment. She first touched Willow's muzzle and face, stroking behind her ears, and then ducked under the webbing to check her feed and water buckets, bringing them out to fill; the hay net was nearly empty. The obvious purpose was to confirm Willow was eating normally. Next, she knelt and, I think that day there were no wraps to undo. She began with a palm on each knee, then a methodical—I was thinking ritual—palming of the cannons, throughout which process I watched her face, thoughtful, calculating. Her palms measured the temperature, 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. She felt the front pasterns and put a palm on each hoof; then 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 bone developing to meet the stress of speed in a massive animal.”

“Do larger horses develop a proportionately thicker layer of new bone on their shin?” 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.” I still aspire to deep metaphors and stupid puns.

“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. 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?” and laughed teasingly. “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 mesh of electrical thermocouple wires that overlap to form a grid of temperature measurements. Each juncture provides a pixel in a temperature profile image of the shin. 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 and weight of an individual thoroughbred.” Her eyes were

squinted with an inward look; her words had not been intended for me; they were merely the audible sounds of her thoughts.

After a brief pause, she continued, “There’s an associated Seebeck effect; that induces heat through a thermocouple, but inefficiently. However, 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, whether I am or not.

“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,” she said. “How evolution works is by matching a species to its environment by adaptation. Non adapted individuals are summarily removed from a gene pool by non-competitiveness in that environment until finally the match is complete. Speed had provided a competitive advantage until the speed of which they were capable has become too great for their skeletal structure.”

“Breeders and trainers have collaborated to get this whole thing out of whack,” I said. “The emphasis is all on the speed that is measured and not on the bone structure required to hold up under that pressure. It wouldn’t require a track record to have outrun a lion.”

“Nor running at breakneck speed for a whole mile to get safely away, for that matter,” she agreed. “A horse can only be expected to run a maximum of three eights of a mile at top speed; a trainer and jockey choose where to spend that energy. Some individuals can win consistently at near record speed over longer distance but the faster they are the more unusual it is for them to retire sound. If the Lamarckian evolution theory were correct—which it isn’t, don’t get me wrong—then Secretariat’s foals wouldn’t have regressed to the mean

as much as they did. Phenotype developments can't modify genotype. Darwinian evolution is correct, but it takes a long time."

"Eons," I said. "And yet breaking track records is a frequent occurrence."

"Breaking records is counter evolutionary, yet there are many instances of Rabbit Runs, who were too fast for their own survival. 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; 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 doubling down on unsoundness."

"You've repeatedly pointed out the problems with breeding Gold Afloat to Rabbit Run," she said. "They would each have been eliminated from the gene pool—in fact they *were* eliminated by natural selection after one mating. But in my opinion, they shouldn't have been removed; they were ideal progenitors of excellent racehorses, horses like Ruffian. The current breeding selection criteria may be at odds with the 'natural' selection process for which survival of the fittest individual throughout the procreation phase of a horse's life has been paramount. But I don't see changing breeding practices."

I furthered a counter argument, "The thoroughbred industry being at odds with natural selection will lead to its demise. In nature, traits like speed would increase survival. But in racing, further increases in speed are a liability to the sustainability of the industry, requiring external support from humans people like your grandfather and you to prevent elimination of the 'best' horses from the gene pool."

"No." She was emphatic. "Although you've identified current breeding selection criteria as the problem, I'll continue to argue that every reasonable racehorse breeder and trainer wants a Gold Run if they can't have a Ruffian. Ruffian's ability, not the associated tragedy, defined a generation of racing. 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 program the environment to support development of bone structures of the foreleg before phenotype expression is completed. This development must be nurtured properly. Racehorses need good trainers."

“The phrase ‘Ruffian Syndrome’ reminds me of a comment my mother made once in speaking of her younger brother who died in his preteens of the flu. ‘The good die young’ is what she said. I hoped it wasn’t true, although it couldn’t have affected me, because maybe that’s what’s wrong with the whole human race.” Laughing then, I added, “I made sure it wouldn’t apply to me.”

“That’s awful, Ricky,” Danni said. “But I see the concepts are related.”

“Sorry for that interruption; it just came to my mind,” I said. “But you’re not protecting Willow’s genetically determined bone structure, you’re altering it by programming minor injuries,” I said. “You’re messing with evolution.”

“The size of human feet, lengths of their 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. It’s self-defeating.”

“So, explain your solution to me one more time or until 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 the bell were about to ring. You’d get a standing ovation as your class scuttles off to the boring economics lecture in their next class?”

She smiled. “Shouldn’t you be clapping, if that’s the case?”

I made the motions of one-hand clapping. “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 approved 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. By carefully adapting conditions during the horse's early development, we can shape its physical characteristics to meet the demands of modern racing. That will avoid serious injuries that remove the fastest individuals from the gene pool."

"Neo evolution," I responded. "So your neo racehorse will no longer be adapted for release with mustangs by the Electric Horseman 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. The good do not need to die young."

"Do you think Sonny Steele—the Electric Horseman that was personified by Robert Redford—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 the 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 such a schedule; you know that. I just follow you around and ask 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 with you, that 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 owners. 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 preparations 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 day need wury bout nuthin.' And so, we did indeed not worry about anything as we left the farm early Tuesday morning. And 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 sat 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.

Flying into Sea-Tac from the east provides a breath-taking view of Mount Rainier and the more distant volcanoes. Puget Sound and Lake Washington surround the Seattle metropolitan skyscrapers in the north as we neared the airport. Once we had landed it seemed like it took forever to un-board and rent a vehicle. Fortunately we had only carry-on baggage. When we had finally got the car rented and were on Highway 405, it once again occurred to me to ask the age-old question, "Your place or mine?" We laughed happily; it was becoming a silly habit of pretending we are younger than we are.

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, including the signature fifty-year-old memory of our standing at the perimeter fence watching an ill-fated horserace, facing the huge, covered stands and infield building where Mrs. Gottstein had still resided in ‘75. “There’s nothing left but a few poplars. That is such a shame,” Danni said, the only statement of what was on both our minds. Then we drove on through Renton and the ‘S’ curves to Kennydale. 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 was concentrating and not 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 why, but cross-country flights wear me out—age I guess, that’s what Danni would say. I spied a recliner facing west over Lake Washington toward Mercer Island; I settled into it, breathing a sigh.

“Don’t you want to check out my condo before you sack out?” She asked.

“Not really. Just let me rest here a minute first.”

I had shut my eyes lying back. Somehow it felt like home—I didn’t care what it looked like. Although I’d never been here before, with Danni nearby, it made the place seem like home. She was busy scurrying around reminding me of just about a year ago when I found myself plunked down in the recliner at Howard farm, her seeming to have set me down like a suitcase to unpack later when she got around to it.

But very soon she came from another room saying, “I’ve made the bed. Don’t you think we could do with a little nap?”

I awoke—I guess I had been napping—and immediately accepted the offer of a bed. Lying there on my back was even more relaxing and when she started singing ‘a thousand miles away from home’, I just drifted off. When I awoke this time, I could hear her in the kitchen; I had a vague thought that there could not possibly be anything in there to eat, and why was she in there anyway, and the counter sense of the scent of something delicious, opposing thoughts whose stark agreement, spawned Hegelian philosophical musing.

“Smells good,” I affirmed with a satisfied yawn as I 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.” I think they were bits of shrimp.

“I think you must be right,” I said as I ate the 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.

Thinking aloud, more to myself than Danni, I said, “We’ll need to pick up some groceries tomorrow and a car at my old place—then turn in the rental.”

After a little she asked, “Is there anything you notice that’s different about this place than what you would have imagined?”

I thought for a moment, then got up from the stool at the island where we were in the kitchen, walked into her bedroom, and finally realized what was missing. “You said your portrait was hanging in here. It isn’t. And where are the other Johnny O’s paintings?”

“I had actually forgotten what had happened to them myself,” she said. “Remember when I was hanging out at your folks’ place after meeting at Tobago’s and I went out for groceries?”

“Yeah. And it took you hours—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 thought I’d found the other half of me.”

“Well,” she clarified, “as I told you, I came over here to clean up 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 why, other than the reality of him in the paintings. I decided I had to get rid of them before you came over 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’re years of my life. I just put them in the closet. I wasn’t ready to explain them—or Johnny—to you back then.”

“I understand that,” I said, softening to her mood. “It took you forever to be willing to relive your Johnny O years with me.”

“You can’t imagine what a relief it was to finally get that explanation out of the way,” she said in response to my reaction. “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 now so you can see how I lived.”

“I’m anxious for that,” I said.

“Me too,” she said. “I was so anxious to see my condo again after all this time, but when I first opened the door, I was overwhelmed by its sterility. It looks more like a gallery showroom between shows than where anyone might actually live.” She paused longer than I’m comfortable with.

“Would it be alright if I re-decorated the rooms by myself—without you here. Maybe you wouldn’t mind going down to the Red Apple to get some milk and cereal for our breakfast tomorrow. I don’t know, Ricky—it’s the last of a major phase of my life; I need to do it alone.” She had teared up.

“Sure,” I agreed. While getting the rest of my clothes on, I looked around the rooms and saw more of what 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. You must have been awfully tired when we got here to see nothing but that recliner.” She was able to laugh at me as she said, “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 to drive by the old place and check if Danni’s tan sedan was still parked on the tarmac with its hubcaps. It was. I wondered whether it would start but I didn’t have the keys with me—or the house keys, for that matter. The lawn weeds were tall, though no worse than the neighbors’. Memories. They were all of the few days with Danni there, not the years I had spent at that place growing up or waiting for Dad to die. I drove on.

Passing Tobago’s brought back memories of the only time I’d ever been inside. Then I spotted Safeway—it made sense that that’s where my mother would have shopped. Finding cereal and milk was easy: Cheerios for Danni and Willow, Wheaties for me and Bruce—thoughts so different from what the Geico caveman would have thought the last time he had bought cereal here. Back on 405, the short drive to Kenndale, I’m reminded of how similar the distance is to that between Howard Farm and Irvine. I realized that all of my

comparisons and perspectives had changed entirely in less than a year; I was from Kentucky now.

I parked in the street in front of the condo before realizing that I could just call Danni and have her open the garage. So I got back in the car to call her, she answered, and moments later the garage door hummed open. I beamed myself up the elevator to the top floor and as those doors opened. The one across the hall, with Danni standing in it smiling, opened simultaneously.

“Hi!” she said.

“Hi, yourself,” I replied before her kiss muted further inanities.

I handed her the eco-friendly bag and glanced around at the condo that had been transformed. It was stunning. In addition to the images of horses on the walls, the shelves now displayed books, and the end tables were adorned with stacks of Richard T. O’Hare novels—all of them, a couple duplicates, hard and soft bound.

Pointing at them, I said, “That’s not how it looked before. You just put those books there to flatter me, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said. “That was the first thing I noticed when I came back here that day—that heap of your books. That’s what gave me the idea to alter the decor 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, smiling mischievously. “And here you are, freaking out, realizing that you had been stalked and snared.” Her explanation was undeniably cute.

I walked over to the first Johnny O horse portrait: a two-by-three-foot image of an Arab-looking gray horse, head-on view. The dished face and flowing mane were striking. I leaned in, noticing the fine ridges of the brush strokes that barely distinguished it from a high-resolution photograph. It was perfect—almost too perfect. I imagined that the likeness was exact, but those eyes conveyed something deeper than the painted surface.

“We had to put Bathsheba down the next day,” Danni said.

I stared into the horse’s eyes and saw what couldn’t have been captured by a camera. There was fear—terror really—that I had recognized in Johnny O’s painting of Rabbit Run back at the farm. It struck me that he had mastered a look of what probably reflected more of himself than of a horse. Johnny had imprinted himself onto his canvases, his own anguish etched into the strokes.

It was haunting, as if the portrait held a coded message from Johnny's final days "When would he have painted this?" I asked softly.

"It was his final painting," she replied. "I think there are brush strokes from the night before he died. It was on his easel; the paint on his palette was still wet when I came home from the hospital."

"I can see why you wouldn't have wanted me to see all this back then. I'd have had to know more about Johnny to understand; I know you needed more time before you could tell me."

"Yeah," she murmured.

I stepped over to face the next painting of a black stallion whose pedigree would list him as 'dark bay or brown'. It was the classic 19th century equine pose, but with far more anatomical accuracy. "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 that he used to paint 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 explain it to Danni or anyone else. It wasn't just a feeling—but something deep inside 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 could comprehend and paint such a bare and beautiful specimen of the femella homo sapiens—a term that had long since embedded itself in my mind and is undoubtedly misogynistic—was nothing short of amazing to me. That this man, not ‘into’ women, could so perfectly portray the perfect woman totally amazed me. Even a former womanizer like me would have been incapable of beholding that woman without wanting to hold her in my arms. It filled me with admiration for Johnny O’Neill. I stood there feeling tiny once again in the presence of the one of whom my first impression had been that she was ‘tiny’.

I looked over at Danni, standing there a bit self-consciously. We stepped into each other’s arms, 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 that I had sat down in initially, took the grocery bag to the kitchen, put the milk in the fridge. Then she sat in the overstuffed chair 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? Just to save a few dollars?”

“Fuck it,” she said with humor, and we were back on our extravagant fun vacation with nothing that had to be done.

“You saw that I got some powdered sugar doughnut holes and coffee.” I got to my feet, “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 as if for no reason.

And I answered "*Fine*," with emphasis added for good reason.

"You think they're up? It's what, ten, eleven o'clock there?"

"I think they go to bed early," I said.

"I'm going to call them anyway. They'd want to know that 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 doing, 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. She rite here wid im."

"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 worry 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."

"Shur 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, releasing a champion thoroughbred 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 tries to release a horse into its natural environment, and you’re trying to 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

The next morning we began deliberations on what to keep and what to throw away, and, increasingly, on how we were going to get everything from western Washington to eastern Kentucky. Those were major concerns to be sure, but beneath them were decisions about long forgotten odds and ends—things that were not worth taking but hard to discard. Secondary, but still very important issues were our two cars and whether one or both of them would do the 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.

We had taken a coffee break, and I was sitting in the recliner that I had initially requisitioned, reading one of the technical papers written by the eminent veterinarian, Danielle O’Neill, PhD. The paper is titled, ‘Cannon Bone Injuries in Thoroughbred Racehorses’, not very restful, but interesting.

Meanwhile, Doctor Danni sat in the overstuffed chair near me, fiddling with one of the ‘shin towels’ used in the research about which I was reading. 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,” she said.

Irritated at being distracted, I peered over at her frustration and channeled Cool Hand Luke, “What we have here is a communication problem.”

“Cute,” she replied angrily, “but not helpful.”

“Does that work off WI-FI?” I asked in a more helpful frame of mind.

“Oh, yeah,” she said, laughed 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’ in what I was reading; it referenced a second appendix that describes the nature of the thermocouples used in the towels. I thumbed to 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 can, with calibration, be converted into a temperature reading.’

So the elemental principle of her wired up shin towels has started to make some sense. I went back to a page I had been reading before being diverted to the shin towels and thermocouples appendices. I've got to say, all the wires on separate circuits with multiple thermocouple elements on each wire, sewn into layers of felt to hide the wires, required precise coordination. Aligning the hot spots on all the wires running north-south with those running east-west involves technical intricacy about which David O'Hare would OD, but I really don't enjoy that sort of thing. I understood it but I didn't appreciate it like he would have. I can't figure out how my beautiful wife whose nude image is hanging on the wall in the next room ever figured this thing out before such a thing even existed and I realize my thinking is screwed up.

"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 said.

"She sure as hell is," I responded, and we laughed with joy.

"But we've got work to do," she said, "'and miles to go before we sleep'."

"What is it with dead poets," I asked. "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. I placed the paper I was reading back on a stack of papers in her 'Academic Papers' box, and placed it and 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, chance of their losing stuff, 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 having terminated the fun by asking, “What about your house in Malibu?”

“Malibu?”

“Wherever you lived before the David O’Hare castle,” she clarified.

“It was Anacortes.”

She did a double take. “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 of Richard O’Hare up there now.”

“Nothing? How can there be nothing there if that’s where you lived when you came to, as you say it, ‘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?” It was a rhetorical question. “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—maybe mine. I went immediately out into the garage to check on my car. I opened the garage door and started the SUV. No problem.

Danni was standing in the doorway between kitchen 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 to charge the battery while I’m 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, shirts, and ties in the closet. Your big screen?”

“Why do I need them? I’m a farmer.”

“We might be invited to some nice occasions sometime. You need to bring them.”

“Okay, we’ll bag them too. I don’t need the screen.”

“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 are."

"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 that 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 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; you don’t do well in this house. 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. I was finally rid of the O’Hare roman brick castle. And Danni got ahold of a more upscale realtor to handle the sale of her condo. It’s clearly well-situated in a well-kept building where professional people might like to live.

We’ll have to clear out of our dwellings so the realtors can work the magic of maximizing the sale prices—and their commissions. We’ve started filling my SUV with the fifty years’ worth of Danni’s life. Her realtor will witness extreme cleanliness in Danni’s condo; it’d hardly been lived in since having been 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 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, ignoring her demand that we both know will be obeyed anyway.

“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 woke early and left before breakfast.

Driving down into Renton, Danni asked, “Do you know what happened to Longacres?”

I answered rhetorically, “They sold it 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.”

“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 give a damn about Boeing and all their problems. She’s still in mourning over Longacres. “It was hard on the horsemen in the northwest when Longacres shut down,” she said.

“Yeah. I’m sure it was, but I missed out on all that.”

“This was the only track with quality racing where a northwest horseman could make a living for thousands of miles around,” she said, “to Minnesota in the east and down to central California in the south. Nothing.”

“Bay Meadows and Golden Gate are gone now too, aren’t they?”

“Right,” she confirmed. “Racing families like the Leonard’s, Baze’s, Gibson’s, Stevens, Walsh’s, Penny’s, Steiner’s, Roberts, Wright’s, McMeans, Klokstad, and who knows how many others, who had produced nationally ranked jockeys and trainers; they all began here.”

I turned off onto the Valley Freeway—Highway 167, heading south from Renton. “Mike Chambers moved to a ranch in Montana, didn’t he?”

“Someone told me that, yeah. Quit, I suppose. 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.” Then, she paused thoughtfully, “Remember Trooper Seven?”

“Won multiple Longacres Mile races. Yeah, I remember hearing that.”

“Yes. In eighty and eighty-one. I was at WAZZU by then, but I attended both those Longacres Mile races and bet him to win both times. Nice horse.”

“I saw it on the news back in ’81, I guess it would have been; it brought back some of my memories of his owner-trainer—Zeren, wasn’t it? Trooper wouldn’t have paid much for a win ticket, did he?”

“No. But that’s not why you bet on a horse—not why I would bet a horse. It’s more personal than that. It’s not like betting on horses running at a major track with the big betting markets, far away from the local scene—races you

watch on a TV screen like a video game, but don't go to the track every time your favorite horse runs, or a local trainer or jockey is vying for the lead in the track standings. Off track betting and Simulcast have killed any semblance of entertainment local racetracks offered. It may not have been classic races, but it was the bread and butter of racing.”

I said, “Other sports venues took over the Seattle area market about then.”

It occurred to me when I noticed the viaduct at southwest 43rd Street up ahead of us that this would probably bring back more sad memories to Danni. I looked over at her. She was looking up as if afraid it would fall on us. Then she went off again as we left it behind us, “I hate that viaduct. I've driven up it a million times to see Johnny at Valley General. He died there; you know.”

There was silence then as we drove on for miles through Kent past James and Meeker. Then we could see the Emerald Downs facilities off on the left and got off on 15th Street, turned left on Ron Crocket Drive in the wetlands on the outskirts of Auburn, and we were there.

“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 where the track kitchen was open to the public. We parked and walked into the facility and down a long hall past racing offices with win pictures of local equine stars along the walls. Entering the restaurant itself we saw the long tables with a few horsemen sitting and talking as they ate. We meandered up to the counter to order where we encountered Sally Steiner, sitting there greeting people as they came in. 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 the 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 enter 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 must have 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—not with the fervor Marylou would have put into it,

only as much as Emerald Downs is to Keeneland by comparison. But I guess I'd have added her to my good person list if she hadn't asked, "When are you ever going to come out with another one 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—both jocks. You also groomed here in what seventy-four?"

"Seventy-five actually," I corrected. "Riley was a jock, not me. But 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—and you were a jock, I watched you and Riley on those championship football and basketball teams."

"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 and a little snicker that brought back memories. "You remember Todd, don't you?"

"Plummer? Sure, we both groomed for Jack. Is he here?"

"No. I don't think Todd's coming up this year. He's an assistant to some big stable in Texas. I haven't heard anything about Jack for a long time."

Danni had walked off with Jane—probably overhearing the mention of Riley's name. I was hoping she had heard the part about his father and him having died. I figured she would be glad to hear 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 from me, 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 and tried killing it with pepper.

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 first, didn't you."

"I did," she responded. "I married Johnny. And for your, or anyone else's information, I'm not sorry Riley is dead. I'm just glad I'm not a suspect."

"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 with Danni’s response: “She might be.” Her tone implied a confidence in public that caught me off guard.

Most of the trainers that came over were descendants of people Danni had known or knew her from the track or her veterinary expertise at Pegasus and WSU. A couple of the younger trainers who came to our table had also heard about Will of Steel and that she was a direct consequence of Danni’s training methods. They seemed to think it had something to do with the work schedule she was using that must differ from the usual routine.

Danni was totally at ease talking with them. “I just adhere more to the old racetrack adage ‘If you don’t wait, they’ll make you wait’ than most trainers do,” she said. “You shouldn’t wait until they tell you that you need to wait.” I wondered how many of them understood what she had only hinted at. She should have handed out some of her published papers.

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 horsemen’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 remembered being assigned to trainers at Longacres. There were just the few huge buildings with long rows of stalls and walkers between buildings shared by many trainers.

“What’s the capacity of this facility?” I asked Bubba.

“A hundred sixteen stalls,” he 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. Do I remember that right?”

“Yep,” Bubba confirmed. “Racing isn’t like it used to be though, Ricky.”

“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. And more horses are trained at training farms.”

“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.” But despite my insistent objectivity and cynicism, alfalfa and timothy hay, urine smells, the sounds of whinnies, hoof stomping, and the churning of walkers brought back fond memories from oh so long ago.

Danni and Jane were walking back from other areas in the barn heading out in the direction of the track where the horses with riders were headed. Bubba and I followed on behind. In the distance snow-covered Mount Rainier appeared above the haze. “Are all your horses out already?” I asked.

“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 isn’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 race 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 made our way back to the car and 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 big part of it, but it’s awful.” Then more silence ensued.

I thought Danni might make more comments 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, Ricky,” she said.

“Me too; I’m in full agreement.” We were in the garage; she had undone her seat belt when 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.” It crosses my mind to be grateful that she isn’t too choosy about her friends, and she keeps them for a long time.

I just said, “Well, let’s give her a spin then.”

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 she had insisted I haul to Kentucky. I locked the house up again while she waited, and 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 she had gone but I hoped it wasn’t to have some maintenance done on that tan sedan she was so in love with.

I had hauled down the bags of stuff to be tossed and drove off to throw them into a large garbage container I had spied behind Safeway. After I got back to the condo, I started taking the bagged stuff for Kentucky down to the SUV. I had another bag of Danni’s clothes ready to haul down when I saw her out the bedroom window. She parked at the curb, and I watched as she pulled some large, folded cardboard boxes out of the trunk. I realized that she must have thought the paintings needed some protection even if they’re to be tucked in behind the driver’s seat.

“It took a while to find what was needed, huh?” I said, as she exited the elevator with the cardboard slabs falling around beside her.

“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.

She placed the cardboard in the closet to wait until we would pack the paintings right before I would take off for Kentucky.

“I’ll leave the paintings up for now; they’ll help the realtor get the idea of how to decorate the place,” she said. Then, “I told Jane we’d see her at the races tomorrow. She has a horse running in the third.”

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. That way

I'll 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 Danni.

Please Danni, 'don't tell her I'm here' raced through my mind.

"I used to be," Danny answered cool as can be. "But I think he must have got too old; he doesn't write any more, does he?"

Sitting there, unnoticed, I felt both relief and irritation. She could've at least given me a better epitaph, I thought, gripping the armrest tighter.

"You think that's the reason?" the woman responded. "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, and your method of blissfully avoiding the requirement to introduce me, equally disturbing."

She just busted out laughing, but although the laughter lingered, I could tell she wanted to think about anything other than selling her condo. "Take me to Tobago's," she said. "I'm starving; I was a bad girl and didn't eat what was set before me this morning."

My response was, "Yep, me too. I think those eggs were warm because they had just been laid."

Next morning we got the SUV loaded with paintings secured in cardboard and blankets behind the seat. I left it locked in the garage. Then Danni drove us on down to the track in her tan sedan. That was my first and only time in it—it was not comfortable for a guy who used to be six foot four. She ranted again driving under the 43rd Street viaduct, but mercifully, not long this time.

After getting into the stands at Emerald Downs we bought 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, Santa Anita, or somewhere as if they were watching it live in front of them. The race 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 at this track 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 overheard my comment and said, "Oh, well, one of the horses scratched this morning." Then our helper was gone, conceivably to cash in his winning ticket on some number at some remote track.

"So somebody entered a lame horse in the stake to make sure the race got carded, 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. This isn't how it should be or how it used to be."

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 one time in particular when 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."

"Yeah, the seventh," she confirmed.

“Suppose a horse’s value is ten thousand dollars,” I conjectured, “but he is entered for and wins the five-thousand-dollar claiming race. Then the owner (a 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 help thinking about Danni’s mother and Molly O’Mar. Millie must have been doing this kind of deranged math.

I imagined that Danni might be thinking similar thoughts, but she avoided her personal angst with, “Inflation increased purses but devalued the horses. Claiming races were always a bit like poker, but this is crazy. These horses have become mere commodities, chips in a poker game, nothing more.”

“I know is all I can say, Danni. Let’s leave after Jane’s horse runs in the third race.”

“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. Danni wanted to go down to the paddock to see Jane’s horse and watch the others being saddled. There was a tape-recorded bugling, and then the post parade. Jane joined us as we stood around at ground level—there was no crowd down there, unlike how it had used to be at Longacres.

“Your horse looks like the class of this race,” Danni said.

“I think so too,” was Jane’s nervous 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 shared a knowing smile with Danni, the kind that relies on the unspoken agreements and a long-standing trust. It was a quiet reminder that even in their dwindling industry, the bonds between horsemen ran deep. She and Danni laughed about their secret, and we all went to put our money on Jane’s horse. 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—barely more than we had bet since the horse was an odds on favorite.

After we were seated in the car, Danni muttered, “Racing used to mean something,” her voice was breaking slightly; I saw a tear. “Now it’s just... that.” She gestured at the huge structure with its sparsely filled stands, her hand dropping limply by her side.

“Shall I drive?” I asked.

“No. I’m fine. I like driving Miss Betsy.” She grabbed the wheel, and we headed for our soon-to-be disowned homes away from home to finish out the day.

“Betsy?”

“Yep. I’ve loved old Betsy since I bought her new.”

Once at the condo, Danni immediately got busy preparing lunches and snacks for my cross-country odyssey.

Chapter Sixteen: Heading for Home

Though I was reluctant to leave Danni, the journey was the right way to get back to where Danni would be when I got there. According to ‘Maps’ it’s 2,500 miles on the fastest route; it should take 34 to 36 hours of continuous driving. I divided that by the 325 miles my SUV can cover on a tank of gas, and I got 8 to 10 fuel stops. I didn’t plan on motel stops, but I don’t know if I can do it without. That fastest route would take me through a succession of varied landscapes. The first leg of that journey would be a nearly straight course 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, and east to St. Louis, altogether 890 more miles east by south-east to Louisville and Lexington, then south through Richmond and finally east to Irvine. Then home!

Off in the kitchen Danni was making sandwiches and wrapping them. I watched her movements, steady and deliberate. I had no doubt about whether each sandwich and snack would have her blessing for a safe journey. “You’ll get there fine,” she said quietly, almost to herself, but glancing over at me.

I heard her comment, but I wondered as I stared down at my laptop. I was becoming overwhelmed at the magnitude of this trip. I had had no idea—2,500 miles. “My God!”

Danni had apparently overheard my thoughts. “What is it?” she asked.

“Did you know that ‘Maps’ thinks it’s faster going home from Keeneland through Richmond rather than down 89?” I was reducing the impact of my exclamation.

“No, it isn’t,” she countered. “I’ve measured it both ways; it’s a couple of miles closer going down 89. And it’s just a lot nicer drive down 89.”

I realized that Google was just taking me as far as Irvine and not all the way back up to Howard farm; that was probably the difference. But I didn’t respond soon enough, I guess, because she was now hanging over my right shoulder with her finger on my touch pad. “Did you know it was twenty-five-hundred fucking miles?” she exclaimed, apparently as shocked as I had been. “May I repeat what you said, but with just a little more emotion?” she asked.

“‘Oh my fucking God!’ You’re not doing that alone Ricky! I’m coming with you.”

“No. There’s no need,” I said. “I’ve got this.”

“No, you effing don’t. I’m coming.”

“No, you effing aren’t,” I countered, but I knew I’d lose this argument. Maybe it’s why I had made my ‘My God’ thought audible. But I hoped 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 leapt 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 like a gymnast having just ‘stuck it’—my laptop was now opened on her lap.

“What the hell, Danni.” I was amazed at this woman once again. “How’d you do that? It’s not like you’re a twenty-year-old trophy wife I just picked up at Smart Cart.”

That started us both on an uncontrollable cascade of laughter, the kind that ripples and swells, momentarily subsiding only to erupt again with even greater intensity.

“‘Smart Cart’? What the hell is that? Is that where you’ve rented all your trophy one-night stands?” More stupid laughing. “I’m canceling that flight,” she said, “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 continued her intimidation, “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 a better commodity than your fucking gas money and you don’t.”

“That’s mean; that’s what that is,” I countered.

But there it is, Danni’s coming with me.

“At a little over fifty miles per hour, we can be home in two days!” She said as she jumped off my lap, handing me my laptop. “I’m going to fill all

the thermoses with coffee and make more sandwiches than I was making for just you.”

I was left wondering: Is she a trophy wife? How much younger than me is she anyway? I do the math: Two years – three at the most. Was she the kid who had bounced next to me at the fence? I should know more exactly. So I figured out exactly how old she is, and it didn’t come close to accounting for how much more energy she had than I did.

“Ricky, why don’t you go down and situate those paintings so they’re just behind the driver’s seat. Then the passenger seat can rear back to allow one of us to sleep while the other one is driving. Let’s take my car over to the castle and be on our way. I have those papers signed that we were going to leave in Miss Betsy.”

I rose without comment to do as told, not resentfully; it’s what should be done, and as I was setting the laptop down and balancing myself, she jumped me like she does and kissed me, giggling like a kid.

I straightened the larger paintings to vertical orientation behind my seat... well, the driver’s seat. They reached to the ceiling. And then I got in on the passenger’s side to see how far back our load would let it go. I had to adjust a couple boxes, pushing them further back. I noticed that she had come down to the garage behind me.

“Let’s go,” she over emoted, still pulling her raincoat on. She had an umbrella and was running out the garage door to the tan sedan on the curb.

I followed her in the SUV, winding down to 405, on through Renton, and over to the ‘castle’—an irritating term she used for this modest building where I grew up. Unlocking the front door, I entered the smelly void and stepped over to the back door to the garage. I reached around the sill to push a button that David O’Hare had been so proud to have installed to avoid sliding the garage door up by hand. It was the Alexa and Ai of his generation. Danni drove her beloved Betsy into its final location, and I pushed the button again. The grinding noise of the garage door started again and stopped. I went back though the house for one last look I didn’t need. Mom was sitting over there in the corner. She looked sad.

“You okay, Ricky?” I forgot Danni was beside me. I might have teared up otherwise.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

“Wait!” she said. “A coffee drinker like you must have a thermos around here somewhere, don’t you?”

I walked 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 said, and I realized that I did 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 was doing takeout. She’s filled her two thermoses and had started another pot. She’d finished off one more loaf of bread for sandwiches. She had some slices laid open for filling or spreading so I got to work on some of them. She had cleaned out the fridge and heated some leftovers. She threw everything else in the fridge into a bag to take out to the garbage when we left. She is a well-oiled machine. I marvel at this woman who took Jenni and me home with her and with whom I get to spend my waning years.

With arms full of bagged thermoses, sandwiches, and garbage we exited Danni and Johnny’s condo. It was a wonderful place.

8:00 PM Thursday

The windshield wipers began slapping time and Danni sang ‘twenty-five-hundred miles away from home, just a singin’ in the rain’ immediately upon our exiting the garage. But it wasn’t too long for the exhilaration of leaving to become a boring reality of the open road made tolerable only by the company one keeps. At virtually every mile I realized that whether chattering away or sleeping peacefully, Danni has made my life worth living and I pondered 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 remembered again why the cheetah was never domesticated; it’s because the female has to run the equivalent of seventy miles as foreplay before she’s ready to mate. One recalls odd facts or experiences when one is alone or the person next to you is sleeping. She had fallen to sleep by the time we hit the summit of the Cascades on I-90 which we would exit after Ellensburg. By

nine o'clock I had turned off onto I-82, which we'd be on until Hermiston, Oregon. I had thought I'd be on I-90 all the way to somewhere in Ohio and then turn south into Kentucky. Looking it up on Maps had shocked me into the realization that that would have been all wrong. It's still hard for me to believe. Geography was never my long suit.

I wondered what sort of thoughts she would have when I would be asleep. Night had fallen before we reached Yakima; we were in the outskirts leaving the town when Danni awoke.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Leaving Yakima, Ma'am, heading toward Pendleton, Salt Lake City, and all points south and east."

"We trailered a couple horses over here once in preparing for the Seafair Queen Stakes that was to be run the next week at Longacres." She hesitated, "That was Gold Run." She said it a bit wistfully I thought; I couldn't see her face, but I think she may have teared up. "She won easily, and Molly placed in that Apple Blossom stake over here for pennies, but not the Seafair. Stoney River took that bigger prize." Danni looked in all directions but there were just a few scattered lights at that hour. "Where is that Yakima track, Ricky?"

"I don't know; I wasn't ever over here. Anyway, there isn't any Yakima track." I gave a chuckle that I knew would not be well received. "It was just a titular branch of the Longacres tree. That tree fell, branches and all."

"Don't get me started on that again."

"So, how'd you sleep?" I didn't want the Longacres lamentations.

"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, finally crossing the Columbia river as we neared Hermiston, joining Highway I-84 there and proceeded on down to Pendleton and beyond. We were lucky to find a station before Baker City where 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 was now the wee hours of Friday morning. Danni had taken the wheel, continuing on down toward Twin Falls. She sang some of the old favorites from our generation and our parent's, and finally just settled in to driving with

me reaching over to pour coffee down her occasionally. I napped a little and awoke to the sun climbing the distant mountains. We needed to fill up the tank and empty our bladders when we got to a junction near Jerome north of Twin Falls, so we did that and hopped back in our respective seats.

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 orange 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 more 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, Middle of Nowhere, USA where the SUV was running on fumes and our bladders were registered as full. Danni bought some unhealthy finger food that was delicious and 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, Ricky."

"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," I said.

"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. But that's it."

"Does everything have to have a dollar value? I don't think you live that way now, Ricky, 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 made a change in fifty years, we'd still be the same idiots we were. We aren't." I paused. "You 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, Ricky, and nobody cares but you.”

“Danni, that is crap! I do not want to meet that redneck who picked you up and raped you repeatedly on the way to Kentucky. I wouldn’t 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 events. I don’t want to hear about them, okay?” After a mile or two I said, “I should have taught ethics at WSU, don’t you think?” I covered it with a chuckle.

“I’m just glad you know without me having even told you; it’s part of who I always thought you were but am sometimes disappointed to find out that you aren’t.”

“Yeah. We’ve been down some winding roads and here we are heading straight for home with tails between our legs.”

“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 one of those cheese sandwiches since I know we don’t have Mac & Jack.”

Danni unwrapped a 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 asked to hear her 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, we’re 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,” she said.

“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-ish 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 Willie and Waylon, and the boys, Emmylou Harris, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bonnie Tyler, Merle Haggard, and Lacey J. Dalton for hours. It would have made a good soundtrack for a movie on the Suicide Ride of Ricky O’Hare. Busted Flat in Baton Rouge with Danni sleeping through it. 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 had refused to discuss the perfect specimens of femella homo sapiens that have graced my bed with Danni, whom I do consider to be 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 haven’t had such a secondary love of my life among the myriad visitations to my chambers.

So why has Marylou somehow seemed more right for that role than all the others who have vied for it? That may be what has been awkward to discuss with Danni because it’s been awkward for me to think about. She was the first to become officially off limits for me in sort of a don’t touch detachment that Johnny must have felt for the beauty he beheld. Jerry Lee Lewis was ‘thirty-nine and holding—holding everything is sight’ in the song. Unfortunately he died a long time ago. Am I sixty-nine and holding, or way past even trying to ‘hold onto everything? Danni accosted me of being seventy and incapable of doing this trip on my own. I could have, couldn’t I? Maybe—maybe not.

I was sure as hell tired. It's dark. I've dozed. 'Hello Marylou; Goodbye heart.' I shook my head to stay awake; breathed in and then out. An enraged Jennifer. Think about Danni. "Oops!" I caught myself saying that out loud, having been awakened by rough going on the shoulder. I pulled the SUV over and brought it to a stop, keeping it from rolling off the shoulder in soft going.

Danni woke up startled. "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, 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 somewhere in the Pacific ocean or something."

"Oh," she said. "Fonner Park. Get out." She was insisting.

"No, Grand Island," I repeated.

"Fonner park is a racetrack in Grand Island." She simplified 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." She rubbed her right wrist with her left, then reached over to unhook my seatbelt. She pushed my door wider for me to get out. "Well you get over there and get some sleep this time, will you? You need some fucking sleep." I was asleep before we got to Lincoln, but I heard her say, "Altoona and Fonner Park belong in my baby book." I remembered that.

9:00 PM Friday

So I slept. I woke up in a gas station with Danni evidently in a bathroom. I think I was asleep again when she returned and for many hours thereafter. We were past Kansas City by then. She must have turned off onto highway 29 because now instead of I-80, we were on I-70 heading for Columbia where according to our gas gage, I should take over. I thought to myself, 'I can do this.' But could I? I shook my head and poured myself some coffee.

Danni noticed that I was no longer comatose, asking me if I was alright.

I said, “Yeah, I don’t think you should take me to ER just yet. I’m pretty sure my arm isn’t broken.”

She looked over to make an independent assessment. She looked very tired and sleepy. Then she asked whether I could take over at Columbia.

The devil and David O’Hare took over my body at that moment and I responded in my deepest voice, “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!” It scared the bejesus out of her—scared me too. I spilled my coffee; luckily it was between lukewarm and cold.

“God damn it, Ricky! That’s not funny,” but she was laughing.

“I never said it was. God damned it,” I cursed wiping my crotch and leg, to which she laughed some more. “But words are starting to correlate in ways they may not ever have done before, Danni,” I confessed. “A while back I got confused between Emmylou and Marylou. Jennifer and whatever. I think I’m ready for the Steven King phase of my writing career.”

“I can keep driving,” she said wearily, uninterested in my histrionics.

“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 well-adapted 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 card thingy, but I am told by a talking machine to do it in the reverse order. I comply without remonstrance. Whatever. Then, by my having successfully completed that transaction, albeit with Danni’s assistance, she suggested that I visit the T, and we were 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 south and east toward Louisville—are you ready for this adventure, Miz McGee?”

“Barely,” Danni said, but then she added: “We’re on the home stretch, Ricky, heading for Louisville, Keeneland, Lexington, and Howard Farm. Make sure you switch to highway 64 at St. Louie. I need some sleep.”

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 said. And then after another mile or so, “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. I don’t know what to believe.”

Ignoring my non sequitur, she calculates, “Ninety-two or -three then?”

“Yeah, I guess he was—pretty shriveled up.”

“Your mom?”

“My mom, what—shriveled up?”

“How old was your mom when she died?” she almost screamed it.

I tried to remember where I was and what I was doing when my mother died. Oh... it came back to me in units of novel publications and separations from women along with the minimal self-awareness that those are not proper units for measuring the amount of time since Jesus died. Elain. New Years of the year of our Lord 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, but through a yawn, and then, “Well, my dad was barely out of his twenties and my mom never saw forty, so I’m doomed.”

Sensing the impossibility of using Danni’s method of predicting her life expectancy, and my insensitivity to keeping her awake trying, I asked, “How about Daniel and Maybelle, and Mac and Liz McGee nee McDonald?”

“Not good,” she said. “Seventy-ish at most, all of them.”

“Well you have something to prove then, don’t you?”

“I do, yes, I do.”

Shortly she was sound asleep, and my thought processes had been muted.

I could only make it as far as Ferdinand, Indiana, at which point my mind is off on Ferdinand the bull and his pink dick—and that damned Jennifer, but I’m still between the lines on Highway 64 as Danni had instructed, so that’s something. The gas gage is low and I’m even lower, but on a more positive

note, my bladder is full, and a sign back there said ‘Lexington 144 mi,’ and I can’t figure out why it didn’t mention Louisville. So what the fuck?

7:00 AM Saturday

Danni woke up bright and cheerful; her mood was contagious. When I mentioned the road sign that I’d spotted a mile or so back, her grin widened. She slipped in behind the wheel and without missing a beat, we were back on the road again, heading toward Louisville, Lexington, and the Howard Farm. I passed her some lukewarm coffee out of the last of our thermoses, sipped a bit myself, and we shared a slightly stale cheese sandwich before I nodded off, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the tires on the highway.

The jarring thud of potholes woke me after turning into New Fox Road. By the time we rolled into the Howard Farm’s gravel drive, I’d managed to rub the sleep from my eyes. The SUV came to a gravel-crunching halt, and within moments, Jameson, Loretta, Jenni, and Bugs were running to meet us. The scene felt like it belonged in a country song—the kind where the green, green grass of home is more than just a lyric. Laughter, barking dogs, and the distant thud of hooves echoed through the yard, blending with the melody of old memories stirred awake. Far away I heard two horses neighing and I’m thinking of Far Away Farm where Man O’ War was foaled; there are hoof beats and barks keeping time to the laughter and song of the return of Howard Farm farmers to their old Kentucky home.

It was just a little after eleven and I did correlate ‘eleven’ as rhyming with ‘heaven’—I hoped I would be over this aphasia thing now that we were home. I have become well aware of the fact that I don’t function well when I’m tired. I could not have made it without Danni. I’m too damned old.

I think we must have set a new record though. Boomers are competitive that way.

After a light lunch and some hot coffee, I spent the afternoon and evening in my recliner before a night of blissful sleep in my own bed.

Chapter Seventeen: Home for Good

It took me a day or two to shake off the road weariness and settle back into my usual happy farmer routine. Danni, on the other hand, bounced right back as if we'd never left. The trip's main purpose had been to retrieve the shin towels she intended to use in perfecting her neo-evolution of the race horse project—a lofty ambition rooted in her unflagging academic curiosity. She was now fully immersed in blending technical precision with hands-on practicality to refine racehorse training methods. Her immediate focus was clear: transforming one very specific racehorse into a champion through her meticulously crafted regimen.

The convenience of having left our west coast lives behind made the trip feel less disruptive, but I'd begun to realize how tenuous her supposed goals were. What had seemed urgent when we'd set out in mid-April now felt a little nebulous, perhaps even illusory. Still, Danni pressed on, layering new techniques into her training process. She measured progress not just by feel but by graphs of temperature changes, tracking the profiles with scientific precision. Predictions about bone structure improvements, however, still relied on her sensitive palms or old-school calipers, neither of which offered much precision. I suspected she was quietly working on something bigger—experimenting with inverse thermocouple effects to pinpoint localized temperature changes to improve and increase bone healing—but she kept those thoughts to herself, a private undercurrent in the flow of her work.

I often caught glimpses of her intensity: the furrowed brow, the half-formed expressions as she scribbled notes or sketched diagrams. Nearby, a set of X-rays lay scattered on the table, showing the foreleg of a horse. Were they Willow's? I wasn't sure, and I didn't ask. So much of what drove Danni existed beneath the surface, unseen and unreachable. Above it all, she carried on as the Danni everyone knew—calm, composed, and unwavering. I stood at a distance, watching and interpreting, always an interested bystander. I might have been outside the fence—or, to stick with the iceberg metaphor, above sea level—peering down at the vastness of what was happening out of sight.

“I need a portable X-ray machine adapted for equine application,” she told me one evening.

Unaware of where this was going, I asked whether laymen could 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 areas on Willow’s forelegs. So I think I need some help.”

I didn’t have much information to contribute to the discussion, but trying to be helpful, I began scrolling through pages about radiology on my laptop, learning bits and pieces about what is involved and hazards of the process.

“Did you know Marylou is a radiologist?” Danni asked out of the blue.

No, I did not fucking know that! But all I said was, “Uh-uh,” and thought about not having needed X-ray vision to imagine all the structural components within her variation of femella homo sapiens and hating myself for not having been able to erase the associated memory more 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 us 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 of that box. There is without doubt some very complicated circuitry in there. I was afraid to push too many buttons.

Willow's training program had resumed with enthusiasm radiating from everyone involved—Danni, Jameson, Jenni, Bugs, Blue, and me. I trailered the principal pair to the training track, eager to witness Willow's latest work. She didn't disappoint. Her performance, as always, was a sight to behold. The trainers who gathered at the rail leaned in, their focus sharpened, anticipation building with every passing moment. You could feel the excitement bubbling in Jimmy as he trotted back, still caught up in the energy of the moment.

After the session, Danni moved seamlessly into her post-work routine. She did her usual rubdown and wrapping before we trailered Willow home. After some time she would unwrap the legs and apply the shin towels. Willow stood tethered, patient as always, while Danni made her more careful measurements. These readings would later be analyzed and scrutinized, a critical piece of her evolving methods. I kept my distance, discreetly observing and documenting the behavior around me—not the numbers, but the nuances of movement and interaction. I'd learned enough to know that if I drew attention to Danni's process it would unsettle her, and I wanted her focus to remain unbroken. It reminded me of my old research habits, cataloging human behavior, watching people in their natural environment, but now my notes were far more personal.

Yes, I was writing again—something that virtually everyone, at least one 'good person' included, had been urging me to do. On Willow's next outing, five days later, Marylou made her first appearance at the training track. Danni hadn't seemed especially keen on me tagging along that morning, and so after helping load Willow into the trailer, I stayed behind to put a couple of hours into my own work.

I heard the familiar rumble of the pickup and trailer on the potholes when Danni returned, and I wandered out to join Jameson, both of us eager to help unload Willow. That's when I saw it—the sleek red Cadillac Escalade Sport Platinum pulling in behind the trailer. It rolled smoothly into the driveway, veering sharply to park right near the house where I stood. And out of that gleaming red luxury vehicle stepped the beaming Marylou herself: the blessed savior of *Will of Steel* and, lest we forget, the 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 directly into my ear, “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. She 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 moseyed on over then to help him with whatever was in the box; I thought I knew what it was. It was. Danni had gotten an X-ray machine to use with her radiologist.

“Oh, my fucking God!”

Danni, Willow, and their radiologist are walking off to the stable with Jameson and I following with the box. “Goes to da stable,” Jameson told me. “Doh no wha tis.”

“X-ray machine,” I told 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 or side effects 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, should know that whether X-rays or just plain flesh-colored visible light photons, 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. Increased risks of cancer is apparently minimal from a relativistic perspective. That's good. But I'm leery of her and any such devices.

Later in the afternoon I was helping Danni with dinner just peeling some potatoes. Marylou came into the kitchen asking if there wasn't anything she could do. Danni told her 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 have done it faster with her box cutter.

"There are carrots," Danni said.

Marylou went over and started whacking away at them and I helped finish them off. Through all this Danni and Marylou were chatting about the new X-ray machine. I wasn't needed any more, so I sidled away from Marylou's left breast to go to my office.

I had long since settled into the extra bedroom as my office, the big screen Danni had bought me loomed before me. But instead of working, I simply sat

behind the desk in my comfort zone, sighing deeply. As I reflected, I realized that my discomfort with company ran deeper than mere social anxiety. It was about Marylou—her presence, her behavior, the unnatural dynamic that would emerge whenever I entered the scene. This issue needed to be resolved—‘put to bed’ was definitely not the way that ‘resolution’ should be phrased.

A peculiar obsession had taken root. This connection defied explanation, unlike any relationship I had previously experienced—though *relationship* felt inadequate, a new word was required that had not yet been precisely coined. My gaze drifted to Danni’s portrait that now hung in the office, prompting contemplation of her connection with Johnny O. It had become my habitual challenge to understand their bond: a love characterized by appreciation for beauty without desiring possession, a nuanced emotional landscape I had long struggled to navigate.

Marylou represented something else entirely—a mutual but unhealthy fixation that consumed us both. In retrospect, I recognized that if I had been my former self—the Richard T. O’Hare she had initially expected to have been in that hotel room—the encounter would have concluded swiftly. She would have maintained silence, and I would have remained characteristically indifferent. Danni made the difference. Her mere existence transformed the trajectory, not through her will or any fault, but the fact that she exists.

The Daniele in the painting would have recoiled at being the catalyst—either facilitating or preventing—an affair. So closure remained elusive. The unresolved tension hung in the air, demanding resolution.

We needed to close this thing out.

“Danni says dinner’s ready,” Marylou told me, peaking into my office and then standing there in the doorway staring at the Danni’s 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’s National Portrait Gallery; 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, her locked onto 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. I grew up in the northwest and I never did any of that.

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 again as they settled in together on the couch with that floozy Jenni cuddled up on Marylou's lap.

Danni thwarted my escape by insisting I join in their 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—that's 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, I 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 incremental environmental hazard effects as the new speciation driver.”

“No, that wasn’t my idea, Danni. It was just my feeble expression of what I understood to be the full impact of what you’re attempting.”

“This is so exciting,” Marylou sprinkled glee into the conversation. “I get it,” she said. “There’re two aspects of evolution of the modern thoroughbred horse. Breeders got way out in front of adaptation by trainers. They have to catch up. If you want to row a fast boat faster, you need stronger oars. And your training approach is how one does that Danni. You did it!”

Yep, Marylou got it. She had really gotten it and expressed it better than I ever could have. I was more impressed with Marylou’s intellectual abilities to grasp complex concepts and put them into words now than I had even been of her beauty. I looked over at Danni; she was glowing. We were all on a high.

Then Marylou looked at her watch, “Goodness Me! It’s after midnight. I have to let you two get some sleep,” she said. “It’s a long way to Cynthia.”

I was wondering what the term ‘Cynthia’ had to do with her psychedelic trip, but Danni clarified that it’s a place here 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 ship. But I’m the guy who drove us off the road somewhere in Nebraska after passing Grand Island

somewhere in the Pacific and confused Emmy Lou Harris for Marylou who lives somewhere north of Paris.

Chapter Eighteen: Expansion

“Hello, Marylou.” The sound of the words felt strange to my ears—the lyrics to a song I might very well have sung in a former life but were no longer applicable to our new roles—the ones I hadn’t completely accepted. It goes without saying that none of what was happening was in any plan I could have conceived in a million years. But the gradual development of a stable habitat is what enables the behavior of a single specie to co-evolve with the various other species within that habitat. One specie cannot survive without another. Predators and prey evolve together. I think that’s a fairly accurate portrayal of the nature of evolution. Neo evolution too must have a habitat but the neo aspect of this evolutionary development involves a major foreshortening of space and 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 has had to be scaled down.

Individuals have been forced to play the roles of species in Danni’s little drama. So whereas I had perceived of Marylou as a perfect female specimen of the species homo sapiens, she had now become a species unto herself in the multifaceted experiment. Dani’s evolution had required a Will Of Steel, who in turn required a Jameson and Blue Berry Hill. And Danni for some reason required a Richard, necessitating a Jenni who needed a Bugs. Everyone’s role requires a new species to flourish—Loretta, the Taylors, Jimmy, and My Blue Kentucky Moon. This one-thing-depending-on-another had be closed like a proverbial snake swallowing its own tail, becoming a ring in the process. Or what in mathematics is called a ‘group’. In the down-sized neo version of this theory with individuals replacing entire species, it was radiology that required a Marylou to bite the tail of this unnatural serpent.

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 even the headaches of a Noah or a Danni McGee? My God! Just holding this whole thing together.

Just like that, whether she knew it or not, Marylou had become a part of the Howard Farm experiment. With time collapsed, the first epoch of that evolution was completed that first night. Danni led the way into ‘our’ (like

Danni and my) bedroom with Marylou trailing closely behind. The moment she stepped inside, her eyes locked on Johnny O's masterpiece: Danielle as the immortal femella homo sapiens, of which Marylou, very predictably enough could not get enough. She couldn't get enough of it. Her amazement at the clothed portrait of Danni in my office had been a mere spark compared to the wildfire that ignited when she beheld Danni rendered nude.

Danni was at ease with the portrayal of herself in both roles as she rifled through drawers. But Marylou wasn't through marveling; the painting had tangled her up in a new obsession. She envisioned such a painting of herself. Of course, Johnny O's death ruled out the opportunity to pose before a highly qualified painter for such a portrait—Marylou's mind that must have seen this as the real tragedy of Johnny O'Neill's death.

All this I only imagined, since I was sitting in my office with their voices muted. I have no doubt oversimplified and complicated everything again, I suppose.

Whether as a joke or just 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 where I sat in my office, I yelled out, "No, he fucking can't!"

Well, you can imagine where that went—even if I, at the time, couldn't.

The next cat out of that bag was the sound of the unlatching of a cupboard and Danni saying, "Look, he did this one of Jenni's namesake."

Oh my fucking God!

Marylou charged into my office, waving the portrait of Jennifer, my own inept attempt at rendering flesh tones with acrylics. Danni was right behind her, laughing her fool head off.

My role in an emerging habitat reality show isn't one I relish. I'd readily reunited with Danni after nearly five decades because I had finally realized that my life was meaningless. She has restored a purpose and some meaning where there was none. She is bigger than life, but sometimes it feels like I've become the sparring partner of a great fighter, proud to play the role, but all too aware as I pick myself up off the mat, that it isn't a role to be envied.

I shouted, "Danni, put that God-damned thing away or I'm gonna' rip it to shreds!" Danni grabbed the painting and the girls ran out, Marylou laughing

hilariously. I heard the cupboard door slam shut. I think Danni must have silently shushed 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 knew that introducing foreign species to alleviate problems in a habitat rarely works out as intended. That certainly jaded my expectation of Danni welcoming Marylou into Eden. But I'll admit, she did fit in admirably before long. Whatever sensual uneasiness we had going became more of a mutual admiration for each other's abilities. The three of us settled into relationships that worked effectively. Danni and I remained sensually enamored and very sexually active; Marylou, although loved in some 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. That epoch of neo-evolution had completed.

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 seemed 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 a 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. For Derby Week Marylou was in Louisville with the Churchill Downs twin steeples, spires, or 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 so probably Danni had envisioned a necessity for my suit other than my coffin.

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. That could 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 if it had potential, 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 tampen bar all roun.”

“Did you see his papers,” Danni asked.

“Yesum, here tar,” and he handed Danni a folder of copies 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; dey outta d bizness til dis one. Dey don nho 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 but happy with what she said.

“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 wanta wean and 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 and put on hold till the foal had 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 one side or the other of seventy like us and though 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 for me 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's family were living in and were saddened by it.

"Dey need elp," Jameson said, his head wagging back and forth. Loretta added that, "They are ambitious good people. Our grandson makes almost nothing for working hard all day to provide for the family. His wife works also, and it's hard work all day cuttin' up chickens. Maybelle takes care of their two charming children all day. She gets tired."

"Dey's rent go up big too." Jameson added. "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. Thomas can fix it if, and when, we need it." 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."

"Is Thomas your grandson's name?" I asked.

"Yes, Thomas," Loretta answered. "Thomas Taylor."

"What does Thomas do now?" I followed up asking.

"He bilder," Jameson said.

"Carpentry?"

"Yessa, plummin, lectricle too, he work on cars, you name it. He hard worker."

"What's he getting paid now?" Danni asked.

"Not much, doh madder, we doh need no moh, we fine." Jameson insisted. "Dey fine sumpin ifn dey need it."

“People improving this farm will get paid a fair wage, Jameson.” Danni was insistent. “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 prefer 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 haffa give two week da boss. Lulu proolly 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.”

“Me too,” I said, but Danni’s glance said, ‘you’re not black.’ It hurt.

In days that followed, Danni was in particularly high spirits, occasionally expressing 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 on,” 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 and Blue were—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 not to 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 on the other side of Blue, so she didn't notice me at first.

"Nathan, you leave Blue alone. He ain't yours."

"Could be, I suppose," I told Loretta; it scared her, she still hadn't seen me behind Blue. "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 and a future. 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—the 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 led 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 eggseleht horsmun. But I take dis kid offn yur hands, yeh c’mon boy, dis is whut dese reins are for.” 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 them, 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.

Nathan and Sadie began kneeling in the shed row right in front of Danni watching her rub and wrap Willow’s legs, asking occasional questions. Danni asked if Nathan wanted to wrap Blue. He learned quickly; he’d do Blue up after riding him. Blue would stand there, proud to be in training again.

Nineteen: The Future of Howard Farm

The Kentucky summer heat was different than any summer I'd ever known—hotter, heavier, and more humid. One doesn't see fireflies out west, but evenings here are a party with tiny dancing lights. The night sky is alive with them. I have found it very pleasant. Lightning flashes and thunderclaps were more frequent before our trip west, but they still occur occasionally—much more often than I had ever gotten used to out west. Such weather was for real here, unlike the west and there had been a tornado watch earlier in the year, but none of that devastation occurred this far north this year.

My career—if you could call it that—had never involved weather other than as research into how it applies to the region about which I happened to be writing. Although, I'd usually visit these places to get a hands-on feel for the region; it wasn't like living here on the horse farm about which I now write. When you try to capture the essence of the one you love on that farm, the way she experiences weather becomes intimate, personal.

It was coming onto the dog days of summer to which Jenni, Bugs, and I adapted by increasing laziness. But not Danni.

On one such hot sultry day she asked what I knew about LLCs.

"It's how a president paid off a porn star," I responded.

"No, no, no! Yuk! I just wanted to know what you know about LLCs."

"Well, it's the first thing that came to mind. It's all over the news."

"That's all you know about it?" she said scornfully. "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. "I am aware that over 2,500 people, probably including Marylou Johnson, own shares in one that owns a thoroughbred horse who happens to have won the Kentucky Derby. But you knew that, and I am guessing that it's the more relevant aspect with regard to LLCs. Am I right? Are you planning on incorporating Willow?"

"No, of course it's not for Willow. And you are absolutely correct that it has nothing to do with porn stars, Mister O'Hare. I have no interest in the porn star application unless there is something you need to tell me. Although,

I'm sure the story of all those women between your two wives must be worth telling someday if we run out of money."

"You started this conversation. Where is it going?" was all I would say.

"Well..." She paused. "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 prompted.

She responded thoughtfully: "We wrote Jamesons into our will and we do accept them as equal owners of Howard Farm, but they aren't actually, are they? They're sort of at our mercy—like Jameson was to Mom's good faith."

"So you want to formalize our agreement? Do you think an LLC might be a way to do that?"

"I don't know is the thing. But remember that financial advisor you had handling your finances before we merged our accounts."

"Roberta," I said.

"Roberta," she echoed with a twist. "She must have been one who passed through your revolving door?"

"Nelson was her last name." I ignored the inuendo. "I can get you her text number if you want to talk to her."

"Do," she said, so I did.

"Is there any reason for me to be involved in your discussion with her? I'd rather not by the way, but 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 from the other room, so she must have placed a call rather than just texting. I went out and pattered around the yard a bit and then walked on down to the river with the kids.

Later Danni told me we needed to talk, which, since we were already doing that, meant that there was a lengthy discussion to be had.

"We need to formalize our joint ownership of the farm" was how she had proceeded. "We don't have descendants to worry about, but the Jamesons do. I think we should incorporate the farm in all our names. What do you think? Do you have any reservations about doing that?"

"None at all," I said. "What's your plan? Was Roberta helpful?"

"Roberta's charming. She said to tell you hello by the way." Danni did her laugh. "She thinks her advice on how to present yourself at Tobago's worked wonders. She says you owe her a call." She paused long enough to

see whether I felt awkward, but I didn't. "On another note, she wasn't sure an LLC was right for our purposes. She mentioned other partnership options that I think we should all discuss together. Let's have Jamesons over after supper 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 for 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, all very quietly.

"There are reasons for him to be concerned. Let's fix them," I said.

So Danni took over explaining what she had learned from Roberta about 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, who would soon arrive. A caveat was that only Danni control what happens with Willow, but should she ever earn any purse monies, they would be the property of Howard Farm. Monies earned from products of the farm would similarly be shared.

This agreement had finally placed the ownership of Howard Farm where Danni felt it belonged, and it definitely brought happiness to all its residents.

A day or two later while we were eating supper, Danni asked me whether Jameson ever mentioned anything about his life before coming to the farm.

"He was just a little kid like me when he came."

I said, "No. All I know for certain is that he didn't want to talk about it."

I remembered trying to find something out about his early years when we were up on the roof and other occasions. But when I asked about anything from back then, he'd go into the same sort of avoidance behavior as when I asked him whether he knew what had happened to Danni's father.

"I've tried to remember when he came. I was little."

"Do you think he's related?"

"Yes, I think he must be. That's why it seems so strange to me that my grandparents didn't leave him a proper inheritance. He never did anything wrong that I was aware of. He worked hard with grandpa."

"He was at least mentioned in the will, you told me once."

"Yes. If I hadn't been so depressed and out of it at the time I think that I would have questioned the will. But I didn't. That's why this arrangement feels so right; it makes up for an oversight."

"You think he's related, but you don't know how?"

"No. I was little when he came. I don't think I was told about him. He was so shy, I remember about the first time I saw him, he was out in the yard with his dog. I said something to him, and he ran into the house. I didn't see him again for a while. When he finally started following around, he would cling to his pant legs if I came over. He wouldn't say anything for the longest time. He was in the house with my grandparents for a while before he moved into the barn, and I don't know why that happened. I think it was what he had wanted. He had his little area fixed up the way a kid would. He had his dog."

"Didn't your mom have quite a few siblings? Didn't you know any of your aunts or uncles, or your cousins?"

"No, not really, and I don't know why. I know Mom was the youngest—by quite a few years, I think." After a thoughtful pause she said, "There was an Uncle Billy who came around once while Dad was still alive. He worked with Dad on fixing things around the farm. But he wasn't very kid-friendly, and he wasn't around long. Mom didn't like him." She paused. "I remember when he left; he wore a uniform that day that left a lasting impression."

"Do you remember whether Jameson was here when your Uncle Billy came?"

"No. No, he wasn't." She put her elbow on the table, her fingers played with her lower lip, her eyes focused on the distance behind me.

"How much later did Jameson show up?"

“He came with Uncle Billy, didn’t he?” the realization having struck her. “He was probably hiding in the house. That’s it, isn’t it?” Then she blurted out, “Viet Nam!”

“Yeah.” Why Jameson couldn’t bring himself to say anything about what had happened to Danni’s father when I had asked him made sense now.

“I remember grandma telling me once that her other daughter died. Uncle Billy must have been a Jameson, Ricky.” She had a sad faraway look in moist eyes. “I’ll bet Mom had Jameson written out of their will because she didn’t like Uncle Billy. She probably told Grampa that she’d take care of it later. But she wasn’t thinking right back then.”

“Well, you have that all straightened out now.”

“Yep. Jameson’s my cousin,” she said softly. “I have family.”

“Me too.”

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.

We were all aware that Will of Steel's race, although her debut, would probably also be her finale. She would not start in a maiden race, let alone for a claim, although that is how most horses begin their racing careers. Even so great a champion as Secretariat started out in a maiden race that was won by Quebec with three other horses finishing 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 thirty-one-length victory in the Belmont stakes 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 had 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' in races he should have won.

"A horse can't speak English," Danni would say—that was her takeaway from the losses Secretariat experienced in races for which he shouldn't have been entered. "You have to be able to read the signs and skip the race or be willing to scratch if your horse isn't right."

These were just a few of the considerations in determining what race to select for Willow's debut. Since Danni avoided discussing specifics, one day I took a private walk down by the river and called Marylou. She understood the dilemma, and we could use her influence on this issue.

"We need to find the race for Willow," I said. "Danni avoids the topic if I mention it. If we find a race that addresses her concerns and you promote it, I think she'll focus on preparing for that race."

"Willow has all the Breeders' Cup nominations," Ricky, "so let's 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. After 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 need. Call me some time tomorrow morning when Danni’s not around and I’ve had a chance to check into who is planning to run where so we know what we’re talking about in trying to persuade Danni.”

“Okay.”

“Right now I think the six-furlong Grade 2 Thoroughbred Clubhouse race for fillies and mares works; 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 that Grade 2 filly race was that the presumed favorite was the undefeated frontrunning winner of a couple of stake races. “She’s fast, but I’m sure Willow’s faster. So, do you agree that that 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, ignoring the reference to racing itself. “What’s been happening in your life, Marylou?”

“Oh, you know. Well, after Derby week Mom took a turn for 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 mutually overlapping interest.

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’d been in so much pain for so long. So I repeat: It’s over. Now, about Willow’s race.”

Anyone else’s gears would be grinding, but not Marylou’s. She could shift from one topic to another with more ease than I have ever witnessed in anyone. She is not a shallow person; it must be a discipline she imposes on herself. Healthy, I suppose.

“There’s a six-furlong fillies-and-mares race that fits Willow to a T. The rumor has the favorite as the undefeated speed horse, Snowballaholic. I think Willow’s faster. Probably a small field.” She fixed Danni with a steady stare, 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 out of the house. We watched as she headed toward the stable. We knew this development would be discussed with Willow—probably through her shins.

“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 real thing, yes, a palpably real. Then it was over, but it would never be completely over. The two of us walked together joyfully toward the stable to be with the rest of us. Nathan was there and then Sadie joined as well.

Tuesday came with the entire farm up early. Jameson would drive up with the kids to witness something special. Jimmy—now licensed and starting his apprenticeship—had arrived, raring to go. He was Danni’s choice as Willow’s eventual jockey, thrilled with his new role and everything else in the world.

Danni checked Willow thoroughly before putting her traveling boots on and leading her out to the trailer. Then, off we went, a caravan of pilgrims on a mission.

The usual crowd was there at the rail with each of the regulars entertaining friends eager 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 mile if she could keep up. “She’s a nice filly,” he told Danni. “After the three-eighths-pole, I’ll have the boy ease her back. I don’t want to ruin her she’s a nice filly.”

Danni requested the other filly take 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, Marquart’s filly was starting to back off a little already, she was back two full lengths by the half mile pole, and by the three-eighths pole she was slowed to a gallop to finish out her lap. Willow passed the quarter pole with a time of 44 $\frac{3}{5}$, finishing in 1:09 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 eighths or after. 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, the sponge wash, scraping off, and walking, all part of my proud role in this production. Meanwhile, Danni discussed the work with Marquart and Marylou, a couple officials and trainers listening in. Then Danni’s unalterable rubdown procedure after Willow had cooled down.

Jameson and the two kids came over to the barn to watch, both kids wired. With the excitement. Jameson said, “I be takin dem hohm outta da way now.”

After a brief stop by the kitchen and hugs from Marylou, we headed back to Howard Farm.

Danni was antsy from that day forward. She checked on Willow too many times a day. Nathan asked me one day after the school bus dropped him and Sadie off at the house, “Is Aunt Danni alright?” He noticed everything.

“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 responded. We grabbed our poles and headed through the woods to the river. Sadie came too—probably to spy on us. We caught us several nice catfish and a couple perch. I took a nice catfish in for our dinner; Nathan and Sadie 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 entering which was not far in the future now. The picture of who would be in the race was a little clearer now. Same favorite unless word of Willow changes that. It would 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. She said, “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 had my fingers through the woven wire chain link fence, and I was looking in at the horseracing world, but the wires were hot now and I had a lot more at stake than I’d ever had before. It was I who felt like I’m on the pogo stick, and I could never make a pogo stick bounce even once. I just wanted 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 the extent of the similarities. Here, millions of dollars in purses are at ply, with graded stake races every race day. Willow's race was a Breeders' Cup Challenge race with a \$350,000 purse. There were three other races that day with larger purses and another with 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 happens to have a \$350,000 purse, with all the other entries in the race having already won or placed in stake races. For her they will just be horses, maybe a little more fun than the ones she had been allowed to work with in the past. For Danni, who learned how to train horses from her parents as a child, this had been a training development enterprise just as it had 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 racing Hall of Fame. Danni had been otherwise engaged 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'd ship up the day before the race. Blue would trailer with us and serve as the pony horse. 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, then Jameson would lead her out to the track where I would dismount, so Danni could take my place ponying Willow in the post parade like she had done at Longacres all those years ago. She would keep Willow calm. That was the plan Danni had worked out after too many discussions with Jameson and me.

Everything felt different from the days we'd trailered up for works. The parking lot was jammed, people were milling around, already horses were being led up to the gap, ready for going over for their race. 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. It 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.

Danni and I slept at the hotel—well, I slept. I don't know how well Danni slept. Jameson had insisted on taking the role of security guard for the night.

The next morning—much earlier than necessary Danni was up scurrying around. She palmed every square centimeter of Willow's body. I thought she might be trying to find a reason to scratch Willow at the last minute. I was so hoping she would relax. I think Willow was too.

But the time came to go on up to the gap. I thought Danni would have much preferred walking Willow over to the paddock rather than handing her off to me and Blue as planned. But she stuck with the plan.

And everything went as planned. At Keeneland when horses reached the track coming out of the paddock, Tom Gilcoyne bugled Boots and Saddles, the post parade having begun. After Danni mounted Blue, I walked back 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 with Nathan 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 doesn't win. That would be a disaster.

"There is absolutely no way that can happen," Marylou convinced me, but I wasn't sure whether it was because she is convincing or that it was true.

We clung to each other emotionally, not physically, and watched Danni on Blue jogging along with Willow, Jimmy sitting quietly. Marylou narrated what she saw through her binoculars. She relates every jog and head toss to me, but with my glasses I preferred to just watch without the magnification.

The odds on the tote board had settled down with Snowballaholic favored at 3-to-2, Willow second at 2-to-1, down considerably from the morning line of 8-to-1 on the program. She had drawn the number four post position, on

the outside of Snowballaholic who had drawn 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 eight... Into the stretch it’s Will of Steel drawing out now by five, Snowballaholic second by nine... It is ALL Will of Steel.*”

Through all of that call of the race, Marylou screamed “Go Willow, go Willow, go Willow...” I thought I’d gone deaf when she quit. We hopped down the steps. She still had my hand; I shook it loose and ran out onto the track. Danni was already on the ground holding Blue’s reins, all smiles; she handed them to me and jumped up to gave me a kiss. I had never felt more six-foot-four in my life. I am a big, big man. I held Blue and watched as Jameson walked Willow around until they were ready for her in the winners circle. Loretta, Maybelle, Lulu, Thomas, and the kids are all in the photo. Danni has a hand on Willow, standing by Jameson. Marylou, Marquart, and several other of the group who have watched every one of Willow’s works on this track were in there too. Nathan broke away from the photo to rushed out to grab Blue’s reins and say, “Get in the photo man!” So I was in one of the photos as a part of Howard Farm, owner of Will of Steel.

After I left the circle, I hopped back on Blue. Jimmy pulled the saddle off of Willow to stand with it on the scales. Jameson handed me Willow’s reins to pony her back across the infield. She wasn’t wild-eyed at all, just content—satisfied, that’s what it was. She nuzzled Blue’s ears affectionately. He liked it, I think.

Once on the backside I lead her over to the test barn where Jameson took her again, lead her in and was given a water bucket to offer her and wash tubs with help to wash her down. Nathan grabbed Blue and motioned for me to get

off, so I went on into the test barn area and Nathan rode off with Blue. Danni was there right away and joined in on washing Willow, with Jameson holding her. Danni stooped down just to feel Willow's shins—she just couldn't help it. She smiled foolishly at me when she rose.

I walked back to our assigned barn. Nathan had Blue unsaddled; Sadie had the bucket of warm sudsy water 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?" Sadie asked.

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 Willow 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 all smiles.

Danni said, "Ricky. You made all this possible."

"Well, Danni," I said, "you did all the impossible parts, and I watched."

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 them very

shortly. Back at the barn, we convinced Jameson that we should load up and head back to the farm where we belong.

We were quietly happy as we drove on out through Lexington. Danni would mimic some phrase from the call of the race where Willow had put on a couple more lengths on the pack and we'd look over at each other smiling. It was a feeling of unmitigated joy that people get to experience far too rarely.

When we were on 89 heading south, I said, "Well, you got Mt. Everest off your bucket list."

"I never had any desire to climb mountains, Ricky. Did you?"

"Nope," I said. "But you scaled the north face of Mt. Evolution, I'd say."

"Let's just say you and I accomplished one hell of a lot once we finally got together." She undid her seatbelt and came over to hug me and give me a kiss.

"Yep, we did," I said. "And Willow's probably back there saying the same thing to Blue."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Afterward

I think “Hello, Marylou” sung in the voice of Ricky Nelson is the way this Afterword would have been approached if Richard O’Hare had been writing it. SPOILER ALERT: Ricky didn’t write this. If he had, he would probably have muttered “Oh, my fucking God,” either before or after he had sung the phrase, as he had so often, whether under his breath or aloud whenever I had inserted myself into his business. The most unfortunate fact is that I, Marylou Johnson, am writing this, because Richard T. and Danni M. O’Hare are both dead.

Like Ismael swirling on a coffin in the whirlpool at the catastrophic end of *Moby Dick*, I am well beyond my depth, but I alone remain to tell the tale. As a longtime follower of Richard T. O’Hare’s work, I’ll do my best to honor his distinctive voice and style in this conclusion to his opus and in what I have to say moving forward, because this story of Danni McGee and Howard Farm is important and deserves to be finished. And I am the one who’s left to do it.

There is actually no afterword required to the story Ricky had been telling about Danni’s life: who the woman was and what she had, could have, and certainly would have, accomplished. That much is clear. But for any story that has an eager audience, there will be those in that audience demanding to know *the rest of the story*” Aspects of the story dealing with the development of Will of Steel certainly deserve elaboration of what-happened-next. 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.

Willow 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 her name in history; there was no need for her, or more likely her opponent to break down in such an effort. Nor had Danni intended to have her bred to a champion sire. She did not envision that, at her age, she would live long enough to inculcate her methods into the tradition-oriented discipline of racehorse training. And, without modifications to the current methods, any offspring would inevitably be destroyed by the unmitigated speed that her offspring would be capable of

achieving. So no, Will Of Steel, like Ruffian in a way, may very probably never have an offspring to race. She and Blue graze together most every day with Jameson and Nathan tending to her legs and every other aspect of her being as a champion should be cared for. 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 one must think Danni actually intended. But, of course, that all depends on Jameson now.

Jameson said best what is left to say of Danni and Ricky: “Dey wuz two peas a pod; yezza, 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 Danni's impulses, but his love for her never wavered. I complicated their relationship, I guess, but none of us saw any harm in it. It was fun and we evolved into a playful trio. Ricky came to see me as the ‘good person’ I think I am.

But like everyone else they carried their share of personal baggage. And the thing about baggage is that even when you try to leave it behind, someone always comes along to give it back to you. Danni had the wilder lifestyle early on, but it was Ricky whose mild upbringing had turned into a lecher's nightmare, 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 won't pretend to regret those occasions—they were some of the happiest times of my life. I suspect Ricky enjoyed remembering them too. He would sometimes joke about his past catching up with him, though he never truly believed his casual affairs would return to haunt him.

So all of what I have said so far adds little 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-driven aspects of his story. Ricky would have resisted adding a plot-driven conclusion to his work, so... as I said, I'm left to do it.

After the big race, Danni carefully checked Willow for any strain or injury after she had cooled down. Finding none and having secured her wraps, she and Ricky briefly joined the celebration in the kitchen; Jameson insisted on he and the kids watching Willow in the barn. The mood was jubilant, particularly Jimmy's, and I found myself caught up in his excitement – it's what I do, I

suppose, if past is prologue. I was so focused on Jimmy that evening that I barely noticed the others, though I did recognize that Jennifer, or a woman who precisely matched Ricky's painting of her, was present in the crowd. That painting would later prove crucial to her identification.

But having come to the party, Danni and Ricky 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 beyond the few brief comments, 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 something curious—that he was quite sure someone had driven out of the parking lot and followed their rig 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 initially thought it had been Jameson and Loretta and the kids until it turned to exit on the old road. The Jamesons arrived and they began lowering the tailgate on the trailer to get the two horses out. 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 life settled into a pleasant rhythm. Jimmy was being sought after as the excellent rider that he is. I showed Jimmy the painting Johnny O had painted of Danni and teased that he should register for art school instead of risking his life on a daily basis. But he's so high after having got to ride that one race on Willow, I think it will take a bad injury to get him to retire.

What ruined the pleasant routine of Howard Farm is what ruins so many lives in America – a deadly combination of readily available assault weapons and political inaction. 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 the shooter had only wanted to kill one person. Ricky would willingly have been such a single victim. I know him—well, knew him—that was who he was.

They had been over at the training track to work Willow and were trailering home when a lone gunman, having lined up back in some trees 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 rolled to a stop. The shooter fled the scene, leaving no witnesses.

Jameson was out hoeing his parsnips when he heard the shots. He jogged up the road and was at the scene in minutes, catching sight of the shooter's car as it turned north onto 89. Thomas arrived soon after, immediately called 911, knowing there was nothing else he could do. Jameson later told police it was a light blue car he had seen driving away.

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 further details. 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 Afterword 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 solo publication. There is the overwhelming sadness of the final event, but at the higher-level perspective in which we all must die, our 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 last 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 teaches us about more than just horse racing in America; it illustrates how one can effectively address the problems in our lives. It provides suggestions – not complete answers. I am optimistic that at least some of how Danni solved 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 use of the inverse thermocouple effect Danni hoped to include. Dad had asked Jameson about acquiring Danni's towels, 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 every five days or so to realize the thrill of all that power under him—he seemed to relate it to our brief indiscretion despite my having tried to distance myself from that being an on-going reality the very next day.

Blue Kentucky Moon will need those towels before long. He's grown into a strapping colt, full of heart. I think Nathan and Jameson are going to apply Danni O'Hare's neo-evolutionary training methods with Moon. I do gamble some and have bet a bunch on Blue Kentucky Moon as a Future Wager for the Kentucky Derby when he's three. I like my chances.

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; Thomas is intent on that outcome. The future is bright.

But still it's with great sadness I close this book.

In my mind I hear Ricky's voice singing, "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. This story has waited at the mercy of the tides and currents to calm the worst of a turbulence that left us all adrift at first. But it wants to be told. It echoes in our hearts, testing the very patience of time. If the continuing story is to be told, as it must be, then it is I who must tell it.

For Danni's innovative approach to thoroughbred racehorse training to make a substantive difference in the world, this story definitely needs to be continued to scientifically validate her conclusions in application to more than one horse. There are some gaping holes and perhaps some shaky inferences in Danni's scientific conclusion. But it was Ricky's expertise as a novelist that made it much more than a tale about horses, it was as much or more about the people who love and care for those horses and each other. That bigger story merits further elaboration – about all of us whose lives were tangled up with Howard Farm and the relentless racing of horses. I don't pretend any special capability. I may seem a bit self-centered and melodramatic in this intro. 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, evolving sagas have continued absent the major protagonists. 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. The major human achievements outlive those who first accomplished 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. Snowballaholic's subsequent success as otherwise undefeated is sufficient testament. 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, in excellent condition and with fitness maintained by the remaining principals of Howard Farm. At least there is the 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 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 I interact with the entire family. I am starting to feel like part of that family.

So, this has become a story of Howard Farm. It is said that there's an end implied in every beginning, so too is a beginning to every end. And so we must start at a cataclysmic event as the brutal beginning of the rest of what had been a tragic story.

Sadie was on her way home from school when the sheriff's officers forced her school bus to back out of New Fox Road, just after it had turned off Highway 89. Through the bus window, she saw a cluster of ambulances and police cars around Willow's horse trailer. The trailer's back ramp was down, and Willow wasn't in there. That struck Sadie as strange. Up ahead, her

father stood by the pickup truck. She watched as emergency workers lifted a blood-covered body from the pickup and covered it with 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 older road merges at its far end with the new road that then meanders on down to the river. The bus turned around to proceed back up the old road.

After Sadie jumped down from the bottom step, she stretched her neck around the bus to peer up 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 away up the old road headed for 89.

“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 it had always been done by Danni 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 gotta 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 box cutter, 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 highlighted 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 as I drove slowly past its exit. 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 been working on the new bedroom at the O’Hare house when he heard the shots. He ran outside, saw Jameson sprinting up the road, and took off after him. The fatalities were beyond anyone’s help, so he called 911. Afterward, he went straight to the trailer, dropped the tailgate, and let Jameson back Willow out onto the road. They exchanged only the few words necessary before Jameson led her back to the farm.

Thomas stayed behind to wait for the aid vehicles, assisting the EMTs when they arrived. He did not return to the farm for an hour or so. When he finally pulled the pickup into the yard, he left it parked with the trailer still hooked up. Then he stepped out and headed toward the women gathered nearby.

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 aimed his weapon at Thomas 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 working on in the new bedroom when the shots rang out. He had seen Jameson through the window, heading toward 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 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 or her—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-15, 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 that day, I drove back to the farm. That was partly because I needed closure for myself, but even more I wanted to be there for them. We were all beginning the grieving process. That sounds like bull shit, but it isn't. Grief is a process, with phases we all go through. I know.

Thomas was still comforting Lulu. It had seemed to me that she'd 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 husband being. He had his own issues, of course, but he was focused entirely on hers.

Loretta called me aside to tell me about the meetings between the entire Jameson family and the O'Hares. They had discussed what should happen to the farm if anything were to happen to them. The foresight surprised me, given how remote the possibility must have seemed before that day.

"Danni and Ricky set it all up so our family could keep the farm running without interruption."

"That's all documented?"

"It is," she confirmed. "Let me show you."

Jameson wandered over to join the conversation. "What you doon?"

"I'm asking Marylou for advice on the legal side of things, Jimmy."

"Good. Ricky put 'em middle drawr in dar," he pointed to Ricky's office. We followed him inside. He pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. These were the same ones the sheriff had glanced at and returned to the drawer.

"Is here."

Loretta took the papers. "Yes, thanks Jimmy." Then turning to me, she asked, "Do we need a lawyer for this, Marylou?"

I glanced at the papers. "You will. I assume you have your own copy."

"Yessum," Jameson confirmed.

"Is there a local lawyer that drew these up?"

“No. Ricky had someone in Washington State do the paperwork. Her name is...” Loretta flipped to the end of the document. “Here.”

I saw the name and paused. I thought it was a woman’s name I had just seen in the diary I’d handed over to the sheriff.

“This sure looks to be legally sound to me. You all understand the terms. Right?”

“Right,” both Jameson and Loretta both confirmed.

“I don’t see any problems with proceeding with your daily lives as stated in this document. I assume Willow and the farm now belong to you and your family free and clear.”

“Sad as tis, it do,” Jameson said.

“If it was that woman who killed them, there is no danger to you or your family. Just go on with your lives as best you can.”

“You think it’s really fine to do that?”

“I’m no expert, but I think I would lock up the new house until the case is solved. Authorities might need to search for more evidence. After that, then you can rearrange your use of the building.”

“Will you help us get an honest lawyer, 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 had grown even more hysterical than when I had first arrived. Loretta noticed my concern and nodded toward the door. It wasn’t immediately clear what she intended other than for me to step outside. She joined me, closing the door behind her.

“She’ll be okay,” Loretta said, her tone suggesting an explanation was coming. “You see, she’s terrified of the 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 just 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 attacked the police officers in

response—that’s what they reported. 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 nothing ever came of it. Just cost us money and trouble.”

“So you have reason to think the legal system might not deal fairly with you.”

“We do. And you know, Marylou. It was so hard on Jimmy. He had tried to warn 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 check the 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 flipped through the pages, stopping at the entry of the *Sometimes A Rose Isn’t A Rose*. There was just one woman listed: Jennifer Wilson. On the next page, beneath *The Day Jack Died*, another name appeared: Roberta Nelson. Voila! And entry had a phone number included.

Leaving Irvine, I drove toward home, which I often call ‘beyond Paris’, up in Cynthiana. I tapped the number into my phone.

“This is Roberta, how can I help you?”

“We have...” My throat tightened. I hadn’t expected to cry, but suddenly, I did. “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. The Jamesons may need your help. Danni and Ricky were killed this morning.”

Roberta gasped, followed by a long silent pause and then she very quietly sobbed. “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.” I hesitated, thinking. “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 more personally. Loretta Jameson showed me your name on the legal agreement you drafted for Danni and Ricky. I imagine the terms in that document will become relevant very soon. The Jamesons have been seriously mistreated by the law before. Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“Oh, my goodness... That was such a good thing Danni and Ricky did. Do you know a good lawyer?”

“Yes, it was a very good thing you helped them with. 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 about Roberta. She was one of the women Ricky had met through his books. The title *Sometimes A Rose Isn’t A Rose* would seem to have applied to Jennifer, but *The Day Jack Died* certainly didn’t seem to be a good fit for Roberta. Still, why had she asked whether the suspect was a woman. I made a note to ask her someday after the dust has settled.

Then I turned my thoughts to legal experts I knew could be relied upon to help Jamesons secure Danni and Ricky's intent on their behalf. My father trained horses 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. He invited me to a late lunch, offering to fill me in personally on how my help had shaped the investigation. He asked if I 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—invite the older Jamesons, which he did.

In retrospect, I think he may have intended something a little more intimate between us, but that didn't happen. It was during that lunch I learned the information I included in the Afterword of Ricky's account. How they had tracked Jennifer Wilson's travel to Kentucky and her suicide that closed out the murder case.

John brought both Danni and Ricky's laptops and phones that he had seized earlier. He said 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. The Jamesons then took Danni's devices hoping they would help Nathan decipher her approach to 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 her on speaker, introducing her to Loretta and Jameson. Loretta did most of the talking, insisting that the entire Jameson family and myself be present for the official reading of the will. She also asked whether that meeting could be held at Howard farm? Maryanne agreed.

Maryanne arranged the meeting to occur a few days later, handling all the preliminaries before I picked her up at the Cincinnati airport. She had confirmed that neither of the O'Hares had direct family or descendants and

that all their joint financial accounts and properties were unencumbered and would be transferred to ‘Jamesons’ – a term that encompassed several families, including two Taylor families, all under the administration of James and Loretta Jameson.

Following Danni and Ricky’s deaths and having concluded the investigation, 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 begun construction on an extra bedroom, which 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 an extra bedroom in Loretta and Jameson’s old house. Their widowed daughter Maybelle had moved into another of the bedrooms in that house, which Thomas had remodeled earlier that summer.

Now, both houses bustled with the energy of cheerful great-grandchildren running in and out. Thomas had inherited Jameson’s drive and ambition—though without the horse obsession or the broken English. His vision for the farm was grand: a top-class horse breeding and racing operation, with white rail fences and a three-quarter-mile training track that Jameson and Nathan had insisted upon. These projects would begin once the buildings had been modernized. The future of Howard Farm had become a shared dream across four generations of the Jameson family.

The beautiful portrait of Danni, painted by Johnny O’Neill that had been hanging in Ricky’s office, now adorned the living room of the O’Hare house, alongside an enlarged win photo of Willow and several of Johnny’s paintings of horses Danni had tried to save through surgery. The nude portrait of her, that had once hung in the O’Hares’ bedroom, now resides in my main room up in Cynthiana, north of Paris. I debated whether to place the nude image Ricky had painted of Jennifer years ago next to it. That would require additional awkward explanations—what is it with nudity? I had planned to reclaim it from the sheriff’s office once their inquiry was finally completed—though I suspect some of the officers will be reluctant to part with it.

I had briefly thought of having Jimmy paint me in a role Ricky had defined as *femella homo sapiens*. Jimmy’s sketches of horses are very well done, reminiscent of Johnny O’Neill’s, and I felt confident that if he put forth

some effort without diverting it to instant gratification, he could have created a decent portrait of me—I'm teasing here. I didn't broach that subject to Jimmy. He would never enroll in art school anyway; he's not the type—particularly since becoming so enamored with his new status as a top jockey. His services are in high demand. I don't think he will bug me to continue a relationship I never envisioned as anything other than a night of celebration—I'm not sure whether he ever considered us as more than that or not. But what there was of that is completely over—even from his perspective.

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 adjust to the technology behind it—showing him how to use apps on an iPhone to view the data generated from the shin towel thermocouple temperature plots, which are superimposed on the x-ray data images I provided as part of my radiology support. He had been entirely unfamiliar with the technical aspects at first but caught on amazingly quickly, largely thanks to Nathan. The boy absorbed every detail and relayed the information to Jameson with remarkable precision.

They have been a delightful pair for me to work with, drawing on my knowledge of radiology as well as racehorse training. Jameson spent his early years assisting Danni's family, and later alongside Danni herself, in training thoroughbreds to race. The help I could offer came primarily from having had so many meaningful conversations over the last few months with the O'Hares. Together we had refined and amply documented Danni's innovative approach. I've learned from my father that he is exploring implications of her methods and the technological approach in his own operation.

Willow has not raced again though she remained completely sound after her decisive victory in the Breeders' Cup for Kentucky bred three-year-old fillies. There was pressure 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. Snowballaholic's major success there and elsewhere only reinforces Willow's reputation.

Danni had purposed that one race was enough to etch Willow's name in history. She saw no reason to risk injury--hers an opponent's-- chasing more

glory as had happened to Ruffian. Ricky and I had tried to persuade her otherwise. Whether we would have succeeded is impossible to know, but became unthinkable so soon after the tragedy. The filly Snowballaholic, who was the runner up in Willow's decisive victory, has since proven herself on the world stage, further solidifying Will of Steel's legacy. To many of us, Ruffian was the greatest filly of all time--but Willow's place in history has closed that gap.

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 deserves. If anything happens to Jameson, Nathan will take over. He's eager, capable, and already stepping into the role. So the story of Will Of Steel's achievements, although now paused, as Danni would have wanted, is far from over. It remains 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 whenever Willow worked, thrilled with all that power under him. He always sounded excited when he told me about it. I appreciated the updates although not as Jimmy might have hoped, but as maintaining my connections to Howard Farm. Occasionally, I went with him down to Estill County, but Jimmy moved on to bigger things. I assume he realized that what he had seen as a budding relationship had been over before it started.

Blue Kentucky Moon is going to need Danni's towels before long. He's a strapping yearling now, full of heart. Nathan and Jameson plan to apply Danni's neo-evolutionary training regimen on him, just as she would have. They're already ahead in adjusting his environment—gradually, the way Danni designed it—with temperature monitoring and radiology assessments to avoid injury. I am betting the farm (almost literally) on my Blue Kentucky Moon winning the Kentucky Derby when he's three.

He arrived within days of Willow's victory to the added excitement of the entire farm. I wish Ricky had described all that enthusiasm and Danni's thoughts on his development, but he didn't. Instead, Nathan who has filled the gap, recalling snippets of Danni's comments on his development. He told me about Danni's going over Moon's pedigree with him, explaining the significance of all those crosses of Bold Ruler. She had a plan for Moon's

‘pre-school’ (a term Nathan remembered her using) 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 in addition to some outside work. It’s really Nathan who’s driving the horse training on the farm; that kid’s on a mission. Occasionally I do x-ray Willow’s legs but there are no changes there. We’re now compiling an in-depth profile of cannon, knee, and pastern bone developments on Blue Kentucky Moon. I’ve told Nathan that he and I must co-author a technical paper on the subject once Moon’s shins have completed their adjustment to racing; he’s enthused about it and so am I. Nathan will accelerate Moon’s training as soon as it is safe and no sooner but I’m guessing Moon will be the fittest and soundest of the two-year-olds at any track once he gets to the track.

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 away after 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 so softly that I knew I must have 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 was 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... just 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 the 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'm catching 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 could I say. I didn't stay long, and proceeded on to Cynthia where I 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 so prominently displayed above my couch, dominated 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 just as though all the grief and confusion we’d been holding in had found a safe place to land. It was intimate in the truest sense. We held on to each other tightly, sobbing quietly together.

“I needed that,” I said. So that was how our time together began.

Roberta nodded, gazing at Danni’s portrait again, before continuing in her hushed voice. “I didn’t realize just how desperately I needed this visit, Marylou. There’s so much to tell someone who understands. I’ve tried therapy, but I gave up on it.”

“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. Let’s talk.”

For a little while neither of us said 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.

“The next day, I listened to him read a short passage from his book. It was exhilarating to me. The passage was 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,” she said. “But I did call the number, 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 wished I'd 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. Her disapproval appeared as wrinkles on her forehead and how she leaned forward in her chair. Her eyes were harsh, but I continued, and by the time I had completed describing the

humiliating scene, her empathy had returned. We both were crying now. I had had no idea the depth of humiliation I would feel in describing what I had done. We sat there, both of us shriveled up into our chairs. It was a bit intense.

So, finally, I asked, “Don’t you think maybe we should have a bite to eat? You must be hungry.” We laughed at our predicaments through tears. I sliced some cheese, and she cut slices of bread.

“I liked sitting snuggled up in that chair, sharing grief,” she said. “I appreciate that you would tell me your embarrassing story; it makes the rest of mine a little easier to tell. It is truly awful, Marylou.”

“It helps having someone else who understands, doesn’t it?” Then we hugged each other a moment before going back to the chairs, our bread and cheese in hand.

So we snuggled in again 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 there you two-timing bastard! Let me in!’”

“Oh, my God, just like me,” I said.

“Oh, no,” Marylou. She was screaming, ‘I know there’s another woman in there with you, Richard’ and right away there were other voices of hotel guests who must have come out of their doorways all along the length of the hall, angry at being awoken so early, or just to watch. There was a flood of obscene curses, and the woman screaming vile obscenities back at them and denouncing Ricky O’Hare as a two-timing lecher all at once. It was awful.”

I was aghast, thinking about way too many similarities to what I had put Ricky through.

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, Marylou—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.

“When I opened the door to escape, the cops came charging in; so I snuck past them getting out. I made my way through a crowd that had developed outside our door. I was dripping blood through a towel I’d wrapped around 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 had the bloody towel shielding my face—I escaped before anyone could stop me. I drove all the way to Spokane crying. The article in the newspaper the next day and the report on the news broadcast the most humiliating experience of my entire life. I had excitedly told one of my friends that I was going to have lunch with Richard O’Hare that day, 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 that he probably went 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?”

She was sobbing and came over as I rose from where I was sitting for a hug. We held each other and sat back in my chair, together now 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, but he said we were done. When I picked up my phone and heard Richard say, ‘Do you think we could have lunch sometime?’ I was thrilled.”

“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 and have tried to find you.’ After assuring him I was okay, he asked again, ‘Would you please meet me for lunch? I’ve come all this way just to see you.’”

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 day. To that he replied, "Yes, yes, yes."

"So did he explain all that 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 thought 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 had risen from our, now uncomfortably squeezed in position in my chair and sat back in the other chair. 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. 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? But he had become a hermit by then. Danni rescued him."

"Rescued him? From what? Had he made a lot of 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 all 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.”

Intrigued, I said, “Danni contacted him by requesting Facebook friendship long after that incident, I think. So how did she do that if all access was ‘locked down’?”

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 ten or twenty Facebook friends on there; it was a different, totally unrecognized name that he gave out to only business people he knew face-to-face who did various jobs for him. Messaging was how he communicated with them.”

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 using 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-capital L-d-capital O-capital B-u-n-n-y-1-3, and that, my dear Marylou,” she said laughing, “is the Wild O’Hare 13 we knew and loved. Isn’t that funny?”

“Funny?” I was shocked and jumped up excitedly to run 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 lap top 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. It was most enjoyable for both of us to be able to sit in on Maryanne’s meeting that closed out Danni and Ricky’s final last will and testament.

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 extolled its literary quality—as if we were suddenly qualified literary critics with MFAs and bylines in *The New Yorker*. 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*, although I

remember him claiming he hadn't given it a title. 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 would probably have 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. Richard must have known that.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Searching for Protagonists

Many months after Jennifer's body had been recovered, the case long since closed, and Roberta having come and gone, Ricky's work on the Danni McGee book was finally accepted for publication. 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 big to consider 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. Conversations 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's teasing about my having lost 'a good one' in Jimmy pierced into something very sensitive, a sudden revelation of a hollow ache of loneliness in me. It wasn't Jimmy—shamefully, I didn't care two hoots about him, and in that moment, I realized the shallowness of not having cared. But, no, it wasn't Jimmy at all. It was a ghost of what should have been—a huge man-shaped void in my life that apparently even Sadie could see needed to be filled. The gravity of that hole pressed up into my chest until I couldn't bear it; I was on the verge of tears. I couldn't stay, the thought of forcing small talk on through lunch overwhelmed me. I mumbled some flimsy excuse and fled, leaving Sadie's outspoken awareness of my private revelation

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; Denny was behind the desk.

I insisted, "Give me the painting, Denny."

"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. For a stunned moment, I thought it was Ricky.

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—and I don't even remember what that was—when I stared up at him, I blurted out, "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.

“Did he match your personality?” He asked, still smiling.

“He did. 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 then too abruptly, I 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 that sentence: “She died.”

We were both halted by that, still sitting, but with our doors open, I turned around 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 those impertinent questions back; it’s like no one had ever had taught me how to behave. I am better than that.”

“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 questions.

"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, to 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, "In all honesty I've known a few, but I didn't know your father in that way. I don't know why he was so god damned loveable, but he was."

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 had

hooked up. I know that for a fact; 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 phone; 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 of days.”

“Fine, but if you take too long, I will bug you with texts,” I warned. “We need to keep in contact to discuss our overlapping 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 sedan.

And speaking of Ven diagrams, he had accelerated the expansion of my universe.

I went on into the Sheriff's office as Keith drove off to thank John for getting the painting and diary back to me. We both knew it was the last we would see of each other, but I think that our dealings had been a pleasant experience for each of us.

I was driving north then on 89 thinking, and before long I came upon the Chevrolet, passed it with a toot of my horn and a wave. He limits himself to the speed limit, I thought.

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 his mother, Amanda died—since you spoke to her apparently. 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? Would he feel betrayed, relieved, or something else entirely?

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. Then, "Edinburg perhaps? Oslo, maybe? How far north?" These were each separate texts, 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 with 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, Cynthiana." And then, "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 before she died."

"Now the house is mine." These were separate texts. "It's actually a long way north of Paris." I laughed to myself and started another text, "I could as accurately have said south of Cincinnati." Then, "but I hate Ohio, Keith." Then 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 about 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. And someone died here who had barely 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 may be 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, even though 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. I suppose that working at Microsoft at the time, she didn’t need financial help. I don’t know any more than that supposition.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it would have changed a lot of things. I think he’d have made a great father if he had known. But there’s a whole world of things that would be different and I think that 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.”

“Your son read the book?”

“Yes, he did. He loved it.”

“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. My mom got into Microsoft on the ground floor; I had no idea how much she had stashed away until after she died. She liked the simple life we’re living. Right now, my having met you is the 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 the last few days have been 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, “no, no, no. 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. And it wasn’t because of Jimmy. There wasn’t ever a Jimmy other than to celebrate Willow’s victory. I was upset because I realized that even Sadie knew that I’m at an age where I need a ‘Jimmy’ but not that Jimmy. I’m damned lonesome to tell you the truth Keith. I went on into Irvine as an excuse to get away from little Sadie teasing me.”

“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 he thought it meant more than it had. He was too young for me—and way too short,” I added because it struck me at that moment as

rather funny. I laughed through tears. “I wish I hadn’t written about him and me in that Afterword.”

“I like knowing everything about you,” 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 rose to go into my bedroom to get the journal and painting of Jennifer. 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 the expression that needs no justification—she’s beautiful, but that’s not what it’s about. She’s just who she is.”

We both stood transfixed looking at Danni—it is overwhelming for me at times. My expression of grief, I think.

“How old was she when this was done?”

“Thirty,” I said. “Maybe a year or two younger, but she looks a lot older, I think. She had 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 have the right to paint someone in the nude one had to be willing to be naked oneself. I think the painter must have known the sadness he had put her through.”

“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,” he said as his 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, settled for a lot less in her job at Microsoft. 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 when I found her. 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 understood 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 the future.”

“Keith. I want to be more than the sweet song of a siren. I can’t see the future, but I’d definitely 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 feel like I have the winning lottery ticket, and I shouldn’t lose it.

Watching now from the passenger’s side, I winced as six-feet-eight-inches of manhood scrunched itself in behind the wheel of a tan sedan. His knees nearly touched the steering wheel once he was in; his hair grazed the ceiling. I bit my lower lip to keep from suggesting we use my Escalade. But I didn’t want to risk my current special guest status. I knew he would bring me back when my audition was over—whether I nailed it or tapped out. I realized that I was being test driven, not the car. If I wanted the rest of my life to be like this, and I did, I had better figure out what this role entails – even this Chevrolet sedan.

But we had driven less than a mile when I said, “Wait.”

Keith looked over at me questioningly, slowing the car down even slower than his normal driving speed, “Wait?”

“Yeah. Pull over ... please.” I paused, thinking as he pulled off the roadway into someone’s wide driveway. “Will you take me back?”

He turned the car and headed back. When we got there, we sat silent on the pad in front of the garage, me not knowing what to say, him wondering no doubt what he could have done wrong. He was looking straight ahead dejectedly when I looked over at him. I touched his arm. “I just need you to help me a minute,” I said. “Will you come in?”

Once in the house, I said, “Help me get this picture down,” as I grabbed the bottom corner of Danni’s image.

Keith reluctantly stepped over to the other end of the couch, but obedient to my stated wish, he grabbed that corner of the painting, his other hand securing the top. “Why are we doing this, Marylou? It’s a beautiful painting. Robert will understand.”

“I know,” I said. “Let’s set it on those two chairs over there and lean it against the wall.”

“What now?” he asked. “That wall looks pretty lonely.”

“I know. Follow me.” I opened the door into the garage and then walked across in front of my Escalade and the empty spot beside it, into the storage room with the furniture I had yet to figure out where to place. “See this cardboard container here? Let’s take it.” I lifted one end; he took the other. We hauled it into the living room where I asked Keith if he had a knife. He didn’t. I got my boxcutter.

We pulled out the canvas of the other painting I had commissioned at the same time I had Willow’s portrait done.

“Wow,” Keith uttered. That’ll look amazing right across the room from Willow.”

“I think so too. For some reason it had been harder for me to imagine facing this image in here every day when I’m alone than the painting of Danni who would have understood my grief. That had been done, what... thirty-five years ago. Stages of grief take time, I guess.”

“I understand that. Time has a healing effect,” he said. Then he paused. “This one is very recent, but it has certainly to have been a fond memory. Right?”

“Yes, of course, but it’s also a world I’ve lost. Someone had taken the photo right when Ricky handed Willow off to Jameson to take into the paddock. It needs Danni in the painting to be complete, but she was waiting in the paddock.”

We hung the photo of Ricky on Blue; they were above, and bluer, than Willow and Jameson. “Your father looks so old and intense in this, Keith. I never thought of him as old.”

“Buts nice looking,” Keith said.

“Said his spitting image,” I laughed. “Usually his expressions were relaxed.” I paused, inspecting the change to my environment. “I like it here and if you bring Robert, I’ll be more relaxed. Here,” I said, “Help me get Danni into the box.”

We tucked Danni away in the storage room and crawled back into the sedan heading north to California.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Crossing the Line

So I'm back watching now from the passenger's side again, feeling more secure in my current special guest status. I'm more sure than ever that I want the rest of my life to be like this.

"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. My complex variables class doesn't meet 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. This house was not bought with Microsoft money. The weathered aluminum siding had faded to a dusty beige, and the front yard—though neatly trimmed—had patches where grass refused to grow. But I realized after a moment's reflection that the pole with a basketball hoop on it meant that the tan Chevrolet sedan in which I sat beside a basketball coach no doubt belonged on this concrete slab. The remaining question was, "Do I?"

As I opened my door, the scent of fresh-cut grass mingled with the faint hint of barbecue smoke hung in the air as I studied the modest single-story structure before me. "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. It was lived-in, functional, bearing the marks of a single father and growing boy—a bike casually tossed near the steps, a baseball glove forgotten on the porch railing, competition ribbons (I didn't yet know were for math), visible through the front window. I should maybe have said, "It looks functional."

"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 and 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? But you might not have turned into this driveway. I’m sorry. I’ll take you back right now or if you ever decide that this is not where you belong, 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, “after he read the book, he 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, math tutoring isn’t what he needs. He’s won ribbons in significant competitions with awards for the accomplishments in math. He might like to tell you about them sometime.”

I meandered over to inspect the ribbons I had noticed through the front window—yeah, for math.

“I think what Robbert would want to learn from you is what you know about horses, girls and the ways of a world that are a lot different from what he’s lived in so far.”

“Well,” I said. “He has earned a scholarship to 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 your 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 kept 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—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 sent a thrill through my body I had not expected. The squeak of sneakers against polished hardwood echoed in the cavernous gym as Keith moved among his players—not just telling but showing, his tall frame fluid and graceful despite its size. His deep voice carried across the court, firm but never harsh, mixing correction with encouragement in perfect measure. The players responded with an intensity that matched his own, their faces lighting up at his rare but powerful smiles of approval. The air hung heavy with the scent of masculine exertion and metallic tang of determination.

I caught myself leaning forward on the bleacher, my fingers gripping the edge, and realized how proud I felt to be associated with him. Glancing over at Robert beside me, I saw the same pride reflected in his eyes, magnified tenfold—an aspiring son watching his father in his element, commanding respect without demanding it.

When the whistle finally blew, the practice didn’t simply end. It transformed. The formal structure dissolved into smaller clusters of players, with Keith moving between them, a hand on a shoulder here, a quiet word there. The tension of the organized practice gave way to something warmer, more familial. Michael, sweat still glistening on his forehead, bounded over

with a ball tucked under his arm, his smile inviting as he extended the ball toward me.

“Want to shoot around?” he asked, nodding toward a side basket.

The ball felt alive in my hands as we bounce-passed it back and forth, its pebbled surface familiar against my fingertips. The satisfying swish of a clean shot through the net brought back memories I hadn’t revisited in years. We conversed all the while as we shot, caught rebounds, and passed the ball back and forth.

“How do you and coach know each other,” he asked.

“She’s 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 my father 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 as totally consenting adults. It 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 planned to stop off at my house in Cynthiaana to switch vehicles for the red Escalade. Before we got there, I whispered over to Keith about how glad I was that we had replaced the painting of Danni. But Robert overheard. He must not have had his seatbelt fastened, because I saw his face right there beside me. He had listened to every word.

“Why did you replace it?” he asked.

“You’ll like the new one better,” I said.

“I want to see the painting of Danni,” Robert said.

Keith looked over at me with a smirk. “You’ll have to show him that one first—he won’t look at anything else until you show him.” He turned back to Robert, “Now fasten your seatbelt, Robert!”

So as we drove up my drive, I clicked to open the garage door.

“Why don’t you open the other door too,” Keith said. That looks like an upgrade.”

“Yes!” Robert exclaimed. “Let’s dump this junker.”

Robert couldn’t get over my beautiful red Escalade. “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, and I have a license to drive that thing.” to which he laughed much harder than one would think such an inanity deserved, but he is just a kid.

Keith got out of the sedan right next to the storage door. “Let’s do show and tell, Marylou, and get it over with.”

So we went into the storage room and pulled Danni from her resting place to show Robert.

“That’s it, huh. I like her.” And that was it.

Inside the house, he exclaimed about my recently changed décor. I was so glad we had done that, wishing I hadn't whispered about Danni.

"That's my grandfather? I like him." He commented regarding the replacement. "I'll see the others at the farm?"

"Yep," I said.

Next, Robert insisted upon a show-and-tell of my entire existence. I showed him everything, choosing not to interact on anything else he saw. Just as Keith had predicted, the painting of Willow winning that Breeders Cup race with Snowballaholic way behind was what Robert considered the most important aspect of my life.

"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 horsey 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 told Robert, and I saw 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 was 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, his weathered hands gripping a wooden pail overflowing with fresh-picked vegetable greens, the mid-day sun casting shadows across the yard. Jameson paused mid-stride when our vehicle approached, recognition flashing in his eyes as he expected to see me behind the wheel. He set the pail down carefully, dirt crumbling from its bottom edge, and ambled over with Bugs lumbering faithfully beside him, the old dog’s nails clicking against the gravel.

When Keith unfolded his tall frame from the driver’s side, Jameson froze. Color drained from his face, then rushed back in a flood. He took a single step backward, his hand rising involuntarily to his chest as if to steady his heart. I watched Keith’s face too—the uncertainty, the hope, the vulnerability I had not seen there.

“I nevah saw such a thang in mah life. Nevah!” Jameson’s voice cracked, decades of memory etched in every syllable. “You ah Rikki O’Hare only a bit biggah! Even biggah!” A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep inside him, part joy and part disbelief, as he reached Keith’s hand with both of his own. His calloused fingers, permanently stained from years of farm work, wrapped around Keith’s in a grip that spoke of welcome and remembrance. “Oh my oh my, is it evah so good to see you!”

Keith’s shoulders relaxed just slightly, and the smile that spread across his face was the softest I had seen, almost boyish. “It is indeed a pleasure to meet my dad’s dearest friends,” his usual confidence giving way to something more tender as he stood on the land his father had loved. The familiar scent of hay

and horses drifting through the air. It took me back to wonderful days I'd spent here conspiring with Ricky.

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. When we finally gathered around the old oak table, it groaned under the weight of the mismatched serving dishes filled to the brim. Steam rose in fragrant clouds from the perfectly caramelized roasts, their edges crisp and centers tender, glistening with juices

that pooled on the platter. The children rushed to claim their seats, their faces flushed from play and hungry anticipation, while Thomas carved the meat with ceremonial precision of someone who understands that food is more than sustenance—it's communion.

Loretta's homemade rolls, golden and butter-brushed, sat nestled in a cloth-lined basket passed from hand to hand. I watched as Robert took one, his eyes widening at the first warm, yeasty bite. Around us, plates clinked, and glasses were filled with sweet tea that caught the light streaming through the windows. I am not much for vegetables, but these women had transformed simple garden offerings into a symphony of flavors—tender green beans with slivers of bacon, corn pudding that melted on the tongue, and roasted root vegetables speckled with herbs from Maybelle's garden.

The parsnips, Jameson's specialty, were a revelation—caramelized with a touch of honey and something else I couldn't quite identify. "What's your secret ingredient?" I asked him as I took another helping.

"Ain't no secret to good food," he replied with a wink, "just little patience and love." The table erupted in laughter and conversation; the stories flowed as freely as the food was passed. At some point Keith's hand found mine beneath the table, and I realized that at that moment of belonging Keith knew that he had had a father. Ricky had built all this that now somehow, improbably, belonged to all of us.]

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 from the other room, "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," I said

"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 mark out where you and Gramps 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 all on the same cloud; it turns out it’s a big cloud, but Keith and I were tired and fell to sleep in no time.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Denouement

March madness had befallen the Keith O'Hare household here in Cynthiana. Keith's team had exceeded expectations this year and for the first time in memory they were included in the madness. They were the bottom seed in a branch of the tournament being played out on the west coast. And I, as the stepmother who had also exceeded even her own expectations, was left to sail the Ship of State as Robert refers to my current duties.

It was a Friday, and after dropping Robert off at school with the promise that, when I picked him up later, we would head on down to Howard Farm. I decided that I would drive down to see my father; I hadn't talked to him in a while, and I knew he had some promising two-year-olds who would be about ready to start. I drove into the yard at the training track, and seeing his pickup, I knew he'd be there. I moseyed into his barn and saw him hunched over, talking to his shoer. Marianne was on the other side of him facing me and came over immediately for hugs—I have gotten over my dismay at her replacing my mother for my dad's affection. I understand how natural it is—even when it's your father.

When Dad was done inspecting the quarter crack and in agreement with his shoer on what kind of shoe to use, he came over to hug me too. They had gotten all the horses out who were to be exercised this day, and Marianne readily gave up her rake to the groom who would finish the sacred duty of raking the shedrow. So we went to breakfast at a little restaurant that caters to the likes of us.

Dad informed me of the good news with his two-year-old stars and the returning veterans who had done well last year. The setback with the quarter crack was minor. He laughed then about how my having insisted on selling Willow had actually helped his business. His association with Willow and Howard Farm had earned him several wealthy clients who plan to bid on select yearlings.

Would he mention his dealings with Jameson and Nathan about training Blue Moon of Kentucky? I gave him every opening, but he didn't. I guess being a 'program trainer' isn't something an established trainer would brag about.

“We’re heading down to Howard Farm after I pick up Robert this afternoon. Have you visited there recently?” I asked, trying to steer the conversation to what I really want to find out.

Dad chuckled, “You should bring Robert here more often. Marianne and I have a great time when he visits.”

I smiled, recalling Robert’s playful nature. “He does enjoy his time here, especially teasing you and Marianne. But he also loves being with the kids at the farm. It’s a different kind of fun for him.” I paused, then to add, “So, about Howard Farm—have you been there lately?” Subtly I repeat my earlier question.

“Yes. We both went down... when was that, Mary?” I thought, *No, Dad, stick with ‘Marianne’. I can handle that better.*

“Last Monday,” Marianne said, coming to his assistance.

“Yes, last Monday. Thomas is getting that farm fixed up top notch, let me tell you. I’ve already arranged to use that farm for lay ups later in the summer when he has those additional paddocks ready. Thomas is a worker.”

“He is,” I said. “It’s good they have that new paddock for Moon. He’s getting too old to run with Willow. He likes having Blue in there with him sometimes though and those kids keep him happy.”

“That’s a nice colt,” Dad said, but no comment about a relationship when he’s racing age that Jameson had told me about.

“And Willow, how do you think she’s doing?” I probe.

“Good. The boy’s doing a good job with her. I’m not sure that mare’s disposition would hold up without continuing the training like they have.”

“No. It’s a shame she hasn’t run again though, don’t you think?” I was giving him every opportunity to tell me about his commitment.

“It is.” He paused. “Well, you never know.”

I knew—and so did he. Jameson told me with Nathan standing right next to him. “Your dad said he’d put his name on a program for her and not bother how we work her or where we run her. Jis let im know.”

“You think they might run her again—against the boys maybe?”

Dad looked at me knowingly finally and laughed as he asked, “You been talking to Jameson?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, who knows. I trust those two and if they want to try it, I’m sure it’d be the right thing to do. I’ll let people know that it’s just my name and I’d just be vouching for them.”

“I think it’s a good thing you’re doing. Willow’s been good for us.”

“Turns out she has. And Danni. Danni was something else.”

“Ricky too,” I said.

“Yeah. Him too and his son. I hope his team beats that top seed. I’m so happy for you and him.”

“Well, I better get going. I’ve got miles to go before I sleep

So I drove on back to Cincinnati to pick Robert up from school.

I talked idly with Jeanie, who waited for a couple kids she would be taking back to her daycare. Just then, I saw Robert striding out of the double doors surrounded by classmates. They were all laughing at something he had said. Just the sight of him made both Jeanie and I laugh. Then Robert broke away from the others and rushed over to give me a big hug. He was taller than I was already and growing like a weed.

“I forgot you’d be picking me up today.”

“I almost did too,” I admitted. “I was afraid I would 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 went quiet, 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 Cynthia—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 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 as he was looking over at some of the Claiborne farm buildings.

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 riding and then raising a couple 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 eventually among the leading breeders in Washington State and were the leading owners at Longacres for several consecutive years as a legacy in Washington State's racing community. They also served on the Washington Horse Breeders Select Sales Pedigree Committee.

In parallel with his horseracing experience, Fred pursued a distinguished scientific career. He earned his degree in physics from the University of Washington. For over 30 years, he contributed to some groundbreaking advancements in electronics research at the Boeing Aerospace Company, earning awards and accolades for technical achievements at conferences. He patented a parallel computer and computing methodologies 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.