

Belmont

In July of 1974, on a day that was unseasonably pleasant for New York City in mid summer, I awaited the arrival of my father from his upstate New York home. The Port Authority Bus Terminal was full of its usual unsavory residents, creatures from an under world. I avoided eye contact, and physical proximity. After some minutes, I saw my father descend from his Scenicruiser, and looked around for me. He was 69 years old, wrinkled, and somewhat shrunken from my last recollection of him. He walked slowly and economically so as to preserve, I knew, his limited breath, impaired by forty years of Camel smoking. We embraced, fondly. I let the inevitable comment about the length of my hair bounce off my ego without notice. I was genuinely glad to see my father, perhaps because I had seen so little of him during the more usual period for such interaction, the years of my growing up. In Compensation, I enjoyed our time together as adults.

My parents divorced when I was small, and my father existed in some nether world from which he would appear once or twice a year to make a brief and somewhat awkward appearance. What I knew of my father's behavior I heard from my mother. She was generally not malicious, but was unquestionably critical of my father's practices for paying child support. I learned by inference that my father was not overly successful in his business ventures. This was due in large part because of a proclivity for golf, tournament bridge, and gambling, at the expense of more mundane things like selling cars, his principal occupation. I grew up with an image in my mind of my father at the card table, frittering away the mortgage payment, a cigarette drooping from his lip, and in spite of his charm and intelligence, falling into the abyss of a dissolute life. This image was not altogether fair or accurate, but it did color my own behavior as a young adult. I shunned gambling and gaming in the same way I shunned the unfortunate denizens of the bus terminal. I feared them and what I feared I avoided. What I avoided, I did not know. I had the abhorrence for what I thought was the seedy underbelly of the human condition.

My father began our conversation by saying he wanted to take me to the race track. "The Race Track", I thought, that's the pearly gate of hell. The pathway into slime. The human counterpart of "Under a Rock" where one would find all sorts of vile creatures of the night, pasty dissolute gamblers, helpless in their unholy compulsion, "No", I responded, "I don't think that's a good idea. It's too far. We haven't eaten lunch. I don't have any money". I ran through an ordered litany why we should do something else. I searched my father's deeply lined face. I could see the trace of the disappointment and hurt.

He said, "Jonathan, have you ever been to the race track?"

"No. And I'm not sure today is a good day to start" But I could feel myself weakening, if only to humor this old man. I had always wanted to please, and in spite of my revulsion with the idea, I didn't want to ruin our day together. Before I had the full phrase out of my mouth, I knew I would accede to his wishes, that I would hate it, but that I would be a good sport however much I despised the very idea.

Within a few minutes, we were on the air conditioned express train to Belmont Race track. This was a place with which my father, not too surprisingly seemed to be very familiar. He had

walked us directly to the correct platform as if he had been there a hundred time before, which I suspected he had.

After about a thirty minute ride, both underground, and then later emerging into the sunny suburban neighborhoods of the boroughs of Brooklyn and then Queens, we came to the Belmont station. "Belmont Race Track, Last Stop". boomed in intercom. We emerged into the balmy sunlight and cloudless blue skies. In front of us was a tall backside of a grandstand. The press of the crowd bore us along to an entrance where my father paid some money and we were admitted into a spacious interior space below the grandstands, dim and functional, full of normal looking persons. I looked around for the obvious compulsive gamblers, mob hustlers, trapped and fallen woman, but could only discern normal looking people. My father busied himself in buying what he called a "Racing Sheet" which was, in fact, a small newspaper, filled with pages and pages of tables with arcane and cryptic information.

"Come" said my father, and we headed for the grandstand. We passed through the portal and I felt like Alice passing through the looking glass. We had moved from one world into another that was as different as night and day. The grey paint and bare bulbs of the ante chamber was replaced by one of the worlds most beautiful sights. In front of me was a greenness like none I have ever seen before. In the middle of this verdant expanse was a lake whose color matched exactly the dark blue sky, Swimming in the lake were swans, of brilliant white. Surrounding this large bucolic tableau was the race track of dark brown dirt carefully groomed with a furrowed pattern that ran around the entire oval. The scene was composed with a sensitivity and beauty that touched me. And, it was enormous. The back stretch seemed miles away. And, oh!, the crowds! The stands and promenade were full with people as beautiful and brightly colored as the a peacocks tail. The electric buzz of excitement and happiness could be felt. We all seemed connected. I began to wonder, if this is what my father also felt. I studied him as he looked around. His lips were turned up in a wry smile.

We took our seats, a hundred yards or so from the finish line to our right. My father pulled out the mysterious Racing Form, and turned to the pages labeled "Belmont Race Track, Saturday July 13, 1974". He explained to me handicapping, odds, the parmutual machines, rider weight, the histories of each horse, claiming races, jockeys, the daily double, exactas, mudders, and rabbits, and furlongs. I asked a few questions. I found myself truly interested. My father's mathematician side was fully in action. He could evaluate in a second, the complex factors that went into calculating and evaluating the odds. "Why doesn't one always bet on the favorite", I asked. That and a dozen other questions were answered in his patient school teacher voice.

Then we heard the sound of trumpets. I looked up and in the distance I could see a procession of horses, their colorful riders, and an equal number of marshals on their ponies. These procession came closer and passed in front of us. I gulped. These animals were prodigious. Their shiny flanks reflected the sunlight like a highly polished Bugatti. Their muscles flexed below their skin in a careless way, as if to say, I am beautiful. I am the fastest animal you will ever see. I am made for running and going fast. I am the best of the best. The jockeys stood on their stirrups like brightly colored gnomes. They seemed slightly sinister in their goggles with their whips strangely out of place on the magnificent running machine that appeared to barely tolerated their featherweight presence. The procession broke into a trot and then an easy gallop

as they came by the grandstand. The crowd cheered. All around me, I could hear the buzz of comments, hopes, speculations, and admiration.

At my father's urging, I studied the racing sheet and did some of my own calculations. I picked a horse named "Little Cupid", a very long shot, ridden by a prominent jockey, Eddie Maple. As the pair rode by, the horse looked in my direction, and I fancied that I caught his eye. His coat was particularly radiant. The jockey in his pink and yellow silks seemed to be talking intently to his mount. We descended once again into the bowls of the grandstand to place our bets. "Two dollars on number five to win", I announced as my father had coached me.

We returned to our seats which were about twenty rows from the barrier of the race track and as many feet above the level of the track. While we were gone, a monstrous contraption called a starting gate had been wheeled into place on the far back stretch, nearly beyond view without the binoculars. This race was, I was told six furlongs, or three quarters of a mile in length. A short race, in the scheme of things, in part because the horses were young at only two years old. The track announcer began to drone the details of the race as the animals milled around in the distance. The excitement was palpable. I felt a touch of my long felt disdain for horse racing, but such thoughts were put aside for the moment as they loaded the horses and riders into the starting gate on the far side of the track.

Then, like an unexpected lightening bolt, the announcer bellowed, "They're off". The crowd yelled in response. The bell was like an electric shock. In the binoculars, I could see the horses bolt from the gate, tails flying out behind them, a mass of jumbled colors and browns, moving from right to left like a caterpillar with a hundred legs and arms. I could also see that the pink and yellow astride the horse with the shiny coat was dead last.

I stood up, in unison with a hundred thousand other, and peered intently at the mass of horses and riders, now coming to the far turn. Except for the crowd yelling, one could hear nothing of the horses. It was like a silent film. Only the bobbing motion of horse head, jockey and flying dirt gave an indication of the heroic effort that we were all witnessing. "And bringing up the rear by one length is Little Cupid..." added the track announcer. As the mass entered the far turn, I could see my pink and yellow come even and pass the last horse (in this field of nine). With every stride he gained a foot on the closely bunched pack in spite of being on the extreme outside and traveling one extra yard for every ten the pack traversed. Half way through the turn, Little Cupid had more horses behind him than in front, but he was still on the wide track. I found myself sharing every stride. My body lurched in unison with his effort, as if I could help, as if my wretched writhing could, in some way, help this noble creature whose only purpose in life was to win this race.

The leader was two full lengths in front of the pack. His easy stride showed disdain for those behind. I thought how arrogant while my pink and yellow was making such a valiant effort. It was hard to tell what was happening as the horses rounded the final turn, and in my magnified view I could only see the foreshortened bodies of the pounding horses, jockeys flailing away with their whips, dirt flying, dust streaming behind. The speed and exertion was incredible. And most amazing of all, as the horses entered the final straightaway, with less than two furlongs to go, I could see that my horse, my Little Cupid, was in front of the pack, and only a pace behind

the leader.

The next ten seconds will forever be burned in my memory. It was like a lifetime of excitement compressed into an instant. But that instant was itself slowed down into its individual milliseconds. Each gesture was distinct in my memory. Each bulging of the chest muscle, each pronation of a hoof, each cruel blow of the jockey's whip, each stride was like an hour in a lifetime. It is captured in my mind and will be with me forever. I saw my horse, my long shot, my first venter into handicapping pull even with the leader. Stride for stride, my horse on the left, the leader on the right. They were matching nerve, matching pride, matching honor to determine which had the better heritage, which had the better will to win. No human can match what these horses were doing. We don't deserve this degree of dedication in these beautiful animals. They don't do it to for us, but because its their primal nature to be as they are. But we benefit greatly from their example, their beauty, and their strength.

The leaders passed by us, nose to nose, stride for stride, and they swept to out right toward the finish line close at hand. The noise was deafening. It was impossible to see who was ahead. The crowd was ecstatic, electric, beside itself with emotion, which reached a climax and then like a passing train became muffled and subdued and once again human. Around me I heard "Did you see that....", "Damn... there goes the double..." The muffled conversation, died down. I looked at myself with much surprise. I was covered with sweat. I had been standing on my sea jumping up and down with all my weight. I was horse from my exhortations. I had tears streaming down my face.

I turned to my father. He was looking at me and smiling.