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THE TAIL OF HIS LUCK

one

Even as the colt’s center of gravity moved and he came banging out of the trailer, T.J. understood this was not to be, after all, the horse of his great luck. The colt planted his feet in the fading glare of a dusk-to-dawn light, like a sailor unsure of the ground, and jerked his head as T.J. walked around him slowly, without changing expression and keeping to the very rim of the light which finally erased itself into shadow with an abrupt, mechanical blink. The sky was a cinder, brightening to a puff of wind.

A man came up from the shedrow, crossing the sloppy ditch at its narrowest point, and stood next to T.J. Behind them, a horse whinnied and the colt gave a high-pitched answer. Somewhere along the row, another horse began kicking its stall.

“Not a bad old goat.”

T.J. nodded. He shifted his weight and felt a squeeze of mud suck gently at his boot. Everything carried the smell of mud.

The man’s name was Ray Cloud, and he took the lead rope from the driver, who was puffy-faced and anxious, and walked the colt around so T.J. could see how he moved.

“This one is going to bring you luck,” Cloud told him. “Fast as a goosed rabbit, I can feel it. Gonna bring you lots of luck.”

“Lots of it.” R.J. agreed. His knee felt like a sponge. It was going to rain again soon.

They coaxed the horse across the ditch and put him in his stall. A ghost of steam rose off a scuff along his canon bone where a leg wrap had kicked loose. They rubbed him down, paying close attention to his legs and treating the scrape with powder. The colt was fidgety. He grabbed a mouthful of bedding and dropped it, then a mouthful of hay. He dropped the hay in his water bucket and splashed at the water without drinking. T.J. decided to keep an eye on him.
Later, at breakfast, Cloud chewed his scrambled eggs. Two jockeys took turns knocking pool balls around an old table, but long strips of tape patched the felt in several places and the balls bumped over them. T.J. stirred ice into his coffee, a habit he had picked up years ago when he had worked in his father's tire repair shop before he was old enough to work at the track. He remembered how they had gone out at night together and scattered nails up and down the highway that ran in front of the shop. “Better than advertising,” his father told him and they laughed, and business picked up like crazy until the sheriff caught them at it and made his father pay a big fine. “Damn bastard just wants his cut,” his father said, and T.J. figured that was true.

Cloud finished his eggs and pushed his plate to the side.

“How you plan to start with him?”

“We'll see.” T.J. shrugged. “Let him settle down today. We'll look at him tomorrow and see.”

The jockeys were smacking the balls harder now so that they jumped in the air whenever they hit the tape. One bounced across the room and rolled behind the counter, but they didn't go after it.

His father was still laughing when T.J. came home from the army. The old highway was almost abandoned except for the traffic it fed into the new interstate at the other edge of town, but the pile of tires behind his shop had turned into a mountain.

“Only rubber plantation in the state.” And his father laughed. “Someday it'll be worth a fortune,” he said.

That night, T.J. went to see Conna Lee, who had written him faithfully the whole time he was away, and she let him take her to the Rocket Inn, telling him over and over again how she had saved herself, and then at the last minute she changed her mind, and he had forced her. After that, she turned curious, and then frisky and enthusiastic. They went back to the same room every night for a week.

Then he found out she was pregnant, her eyes were shiny with
disaster when she told him, and he couldn’t for the life of him see which way to turn. The next day, he was kicked by a horse. He had come back from all that time in Viet Nam without a scratch and then, first thing, he was kicked in the knee by a horse. His father thought it was funny and laughed, but T.J. found himself waking up from sudden dreams, out of breath and grabbing with both hands at the air around him.

“This is God’s punishment for our sins,” Conna told him. She wore a black dress and a look of infinite grief.

“We’ll get married,” he said, but she wasn’t listening.

“Pray with me,” she told him and got right down on her knees in the hospital room with the door open and her father in the hall, waiting. T.J. closed his eyes and didn’t open them again until she was gone. He remembered the story of her grandfather who was burned to death years ago in a battle with the Devil, at a tent meeting back on the ridge above the racetrack. They said the whole ridge lit up at once and he came tumbling down a ball of flame, still screaming defiance, they said, and spooking the horses, and for a moment the vision of it leaped out at T.J. with too much clarity, and that’s when he first lost control and felt himself chasing headlong after the cork-screwed tail of his luck.

Pool balls were flying off the table now with regularity. Cloud got up and looked out the window at the rain that was coming down in sheets, but T.J. shrugged and lowered his head as he walked out the door.

two

Rain was still coming down several days later when T.J. got Cloud to help him hang a mattress against the back wall in the colt’s stall so he wouldn’t do any more damage kicking it. He was about fed up. That morning the owner, a huge Texan with a blue peacock feather in his hat, had come to watch his horse run. The colt pranced all the way to the starting gate and went in without problems, but then he flipped
over backwards before the rest of the horses were loaded, and the track stewards disqualified him. The jockey was sent to the hospital. 

"I'm sick of this," said the Texan as he walked away.

The colt was fascinated by the mattress. He touched it with his nose and then he banged it. Finally he wheeled and gave it a hard, muffled kick. T.J. laughed, an unlikely sound that made Cloud think of flames snapping into dry wood. The air smelled somehow like Cloud's cigar even though T.J. knew he had thrown it away hours before. Cloud only smoked cigars when owners were around.

"Bothers em," he said.

"The problem is," began T.J., "where are we going to find another boy dumb enough to ride this son of a bitch?"

That night as T.J. sat in the same after-dinner chair in the humid livingroom of Conna Lee's parents that he sat in every Tuesday, with his leg propped in front of him like a dead tree, he suffered a premonition.

Conna Lee sat across from him, her hands tight in her lap, a photograph of her grandmother on the wall behind her right shoulder. The wallpaper was splotched with mildew. The old woman's face was set in the absolute, unbending expression it had taken on the day of her husband's disaster, and with a shock, T.J. saw Conna's face carrying that very same look of a perfect widow that had nothing to do with patience. For a breath, they stared at him like twins, and he felt his blood collect between his shoulder blades and begin to leak down his spine. But, in the next breath, he recognized that if he moved, the speechless eyes would not follow him because nothing outside their permanent, fixed gaze would exist.

His own eyes became opaque and slick as the turned-up belly of a fish, and Conna bit her tongue to keep from saying something foolish.

Her father was giving T.J. his weekly judgements on the progress of Conna Lee's cooking. Every Monday, she cooked for her family and on Tuesday her father gave T.J. his report. He was not encouraging. Yesterday, she had burned the chicken and served up the biscuits cold. She never cooked on Tuesdays when T.J. was over.
"You'll get too much of that soon enough," her father said. His face was oddly unmarked and fragile, but the back of his neck was as thick and creased as a lizard. He fiddled with his pipe while he talked, but didn't light it.

Later, with a determined gesture, he sat out on the porchswing and had a smoke. It was the first time T.J. and Conna Lee were alone together in the same room since that day in the hospital, and T.J. was embarrassed. He felt the room come close and empty of air, but Conna smiled casually, her hands uncurled from her lap, and she asked polite, distant questions about the horses he was training. Her mother made too much noise in the kitchen.

three

T.J. came awake later than he should have. He flung his hands and rolled into a sitting position, a full heartbeat before his brain was aware of the change. A woman's voice had asked him, "Are you awake?"

"No. I'm on fire," he answered, and another voice from somewhere deep in his sleep continued screaming, but T.J. had already forgotten it and the sound only registered itself as a cat crying, his ears tuned completely to the noises around him.

He touched the cold place between his shoulders.

Without hurrying, he dressed and put a shallow pan of water on the hotplate. The horses were already fed and their quiet munching floated voices into the camper, but he couldn't make out any of the words. His alarm clock had fallen over and it vibrated like a wind-up toy on a magazine by his bed, but it didn't ring. While he waited for the water to heat, T.J. wondered whether he should tell Conna he wasn't going to see her anymore. He tried it out, tracking back to the day he had come home, trying to find the place where things had taken the wrong turn, but his tenuous instincts failed him. Even with his eyes closed, he couldn't imagine his life without her.
The voices outside were becoming insistent as T.J. turned off the hotplate. He moved some shirts from the counter and put them in a dresser drawer, but he didn't know where to put his memory of those nights at the motel with Conna Lee; or where to put the memory of what she had done with the baby; or what to do with all the other memories that were turning around each other and shifting into the deep, burnt rubber smell of his father's laughter.

A fly buzzed like a dream on the lip of his shaving mug.

When he stepped out of the camper, he was holding the pan of water under his chin and shaving, like he always did, without a mirror. At the bottom of the step, Cloud was arguing with a scarecrow that T.J. recognized, after a moment, as one of the jockeys he had seen playing pool in the track cafe. The jockey's hair was the color and texture of damp straw. His hands were spread open, palms out.

"Hey man, don't worry. It's alright, ya know? I can handle it."

The jockey turned toward T.J., his wide grin producing two missing teeth and breath that carried a sweet smell. His eyes were swimmy.

"He wants to ride," Cloud said.

T.J. shook his head.

"I already told you I can do it, hey."

T.J. tossed out the water and set the pan inside the camper door, pretending to consider it. He wiped flecks of soap off his face with his hand.

"You don't look in any shape to ride."

"I can tame that crazy horse you got." The voice became suddenly gentle. "You watch me tame him."

"If you dope my horse," T.J. told him, "I'll break your legs."

This time the grin was more careful.

"Hey, you see anyone else standing here lookin' to ride for you?" As he spoke, the jockey turned his head in both directions.

Finally, T.J. shrugged and looked at Cloud. "It's his life." Then he looked back at the jockey.

"If you're here tomorrow morning at six ready to gallop, then we'll
see.”

“Just so we understand each other,” the jockey answered.

The ridge shouldered up from the morning fog as they walked over to the shedrow. The jockey came with them and eyed each of the horses. Then, without being asked, he picked up a rake and started to clean out the stalls. T.J. and Cloud spent the morning re-setting the horses’ shoes, and, for once, the colt didn’t act up.

By supper, the jockey had moved a cot into T.J.’s feed room, and that night as T.J. made a last check on the stock, he was lying on the cot in his shorts, his bony ribs covered with scars, smoking a joint and whistling under his breath.

The colt worked past the rail under a tight rein, and the sound of his hooves fell apart and disappeared in the fog. Although normally it should have been crowded by this time of the morning, today the track was strangely empty, as if the world was holding its breath, he thought. The sky was dark and hanging. T.J. caught himself watching the ridge for movement. It was on days just like this, he realized with a start, that they had moved in on villages, suddenly, as if out of nowhere, burning everything in sight. He almost never thought about those things anymore, and the sharp pain of the memory surprised him. He forced his attention back to the track, rubbing his knee absently.

The colt seemed to be coming along, though he still had days when his mood turned black and mean. But they had worked him through the gates a dozen times, first by himself, then with Cloud’s old gelding, until he was comfortable. T.J. had cut small holes in the blinkers so the colt could see a little of what was going on around him, and this helped settle him down some. They took their time, bringing him along slowly so that when they finally jumped him out with a bunch of green two-year-olds, he ran like a dream, as if nothing could ever catch him. The rain held off, and the colt liked the drier track. He
also seemed to like the new jockey.

So T.J. entered him to race again. They had breezed the colt hard two days, and now they were giving him a light work to take the edge off. The Texan was coming up first thing in the morning, and T.J. had been hoping it wouldn’t rain, but he could see now that it would. He looked up again at the place where the layers of clouds bumped the top of the ridge. Some of them, the higher white ones that he could just barely see, thin and elusive, looked like vapor trails above the storm clouds. Please don’t make us go in again, he had prayed back then, whispering into the silence, please don’t make me go in again, but they always had.

“Your turn’s coming,” Cloud predicted as he walked up to join T.J. at the rail. “I can feel it. Tomorrow’s your turn.”

The huge Texan arrived at dawn while T.J. was graining the other horses. The first bad sign was a steady drizzle. The second bad sign was that the Texas was pulling a horse trailer. T.J. saw it would be no use suggesting they scratch the colt because of the mud.

The Texan waited for T.J. in front of the colt’s stall. Cupped in his hand was a small pad of notes which he kept glancing down at until, finally, he pencilled something and put the pad in his pocket. He nodded as T.J. approached and said, “Bring him out.”

But the colt didn’t want to come out. He shied when the drizzle hit his face, and then he walked out on his hind legs, striking with his front feet at the rain, splashing mud everywhere as he came back down heavily on all fours.

“God dammit.” The Texan checked his hat with the enormous peacock feather to make sure it wasn’t splattered.

T.J. felt cornered by the Texan, by the ridge at his back that he suddenly half-imagined was going to burst into flames at any moment. His knee was filling up with the rain that seeped down through the growing empty place between his shoulders. He watched the colt, whose feet were rooted firmly.
The Texan went off somewhere for breakfast.

The third bad sign was the disappearance of the jockey. Cloud threw his cigar to the ground and went to look for him while T. J. tried to calm the colt who weaved in his stall, slinging his head, and thumped the mattress that was still hanging on the back wall. By the time Cloud turned up with the jockey, the colt had worked himself into a lather.

“Hey man, no problem. Just went to shoot some pool first, ya know? All the balls were gone though, can you believe it, weren’t any balls.”

The jockey was floating. A grin gaped across his face, and that’s when T. J. felt himself beginning to lose control again.

“Don’t worry, hey. I can ride. But the way that horse is acting, it won’t make much difference.”

T. J.’s knee throbbed, and he fought an almost overwhelming urge to sit down in the mud. The jockey’s voice came to him like silk from a great distance, and he had to force himself to pay attention.

“It works on me, man,” the jockey was saying. When T. J. didn’t answer, the jockey ducked into the feed room, coming back with a paper bag and a joint.

“Besides, wouldn’t hurt him any. Just relax him a little, that’s all. Wouldn’t even show up in a test, ya know?”


“I’m the one’s got to ride him.”

They were right, T. J. saw he didn’t have anything to lose. As it was, even if they could get him into the gates at all, it wouldn’t matter if he had already worn himself out like this, running his race back here in the stall. The colt splintered his feed box.

“It’ll work, man.”

T. J. knew then that it really didn’t make any difference, as long as he made something happen. He had to decide something. The Texan wasn’t going to hear any excuses, and T. J. could imagine the scenes. When he nodded, the jockey filled the bag with smoke, and T. J. and Cloud managed to hold the colt’s head while the jockey slipped the
bag over his nose.

And it did work. The colt behaved all the way to the saddling paddock and paraded calmly to the starting gates. A few fat drops mixed in with the mist, keeping the crowd under the roof of the stands and away from the rail. When the gates flew open, the colt almost didn't come out. Then he exploded, already two lengths behind but running like the wind along the inside, his ears pinned flat against his head, and he finished a close third before he stumbled and went down.

five

T.J. sat by himself in the track cafe and thought about last night. Just before dark he had walked to the top of the ridge where he found an old, dead tree that had been split by lightning. There, with the whole world empty and still, except for the wind breathing across the leaves, he had thought about the turnings of his luck, remembering clearly his time in Viet Nam and everything that had happened there, and trying to untangle the impossible situation with Conna Lee and her family.

Now, as he left the cafe and cut across the track toward the shedrow, his knee still ached from the climb, but he almost took a kind of pleasure in it. Although the colt hadn't broken any bones, bowed tendons had finished his racing career; and this morning, after calling their owners, T.J. had turned the rest of the horses over to Cloud.

He had gone to see Conna Lee as soon as he had washed up and changed clothes. Her father endured a moment of confusion at seeing him on the wrong night because they had fallen so comfortably into the habit of T.J.'s Tuesday visits. T.J. had stepped into the livingroom, where they were all gathered for family prayers, and told Conna he was leaving, it was time to make up her mind if she was going to marry him or not. He had hopes of finding work at the big tracks in New Mexico, he said. Her mother tried to turn him to stone
on the spot, but Conna Lee answered yes quickly, because the truth was, she told them, there was nothing in this world that she wanted more.

Her mother slapped the Bible onto the table under the grandmother's photograph and went into the kitchen without a word, but it was all settled. After a while, T.J. went home to tell his father, and the two of them sat for a long time on the back porch, staring at the incredible pile of tires that was shadowed oddly in the yellow porch light. "Someday when I'm gone," his father had gestured at the vague shapes, "this will probably bring you a fortune." This time he didn't laugh.

T.J. splashed through the ditch to the shedrow. He was going to leave the next morning and come back in two weeks for the wedding. It was all settled. He stopped at the colt's now empty stall, and then he stepped into it for a moment, letting the half-door swing on its hinges.