Two Racetracks

It was as though I had slept in a stable. Maybe it was just in my head, the smell of horse hair and damp straw. After I looked up at the ceiling for a few moments, the true smell of bacon frying and coffee brewing overpowered the smell in my head. It was Saturday, the day when Papa and I were going to the track. After looking up at the ceiling and getting the smell of horse hair and damp straw out of my head, I jumped out of bed, put on my jeans and tee-shirt, checked out the window for any chance of rain, donned a pair of socks I had hidden under my bed, and put on my sneakers. I looked in the mirror and combed my hair. I was too young to shave. All set and ready to go. Then I walked down to our kitchen at the bottom of the stairs.

Our living room was next to the kitchen. Papa stood facing the mantel above our fireplace. I knew he didn’t hear me. You could say he was locked in. You could say it was a sort of ritual. A small white crucifix with a tiny Jesus with tiny red spots on his palms and feet sat at the centre of the mantel. Jesus looked so lonely the way he was hung up on that cross all alone on the mantel. Papa faced the tiny Jesus and I could tell he was crossing himself. The Greeks cross themselves from right to left. All the others cross themselves backwards. I decided to let Pa finish his business and walked into the kitchen.

The daily racing form was spread out on the kitchen table. A half empty cup of coffee sat on the form. Off to the side was an ashtray with five cigarette butts floating in burnt ashes. A plate of bacon had not been touched and a coffee pot low on coffee sat on the stove.

I looked down at the racing form. This is where the magic happened, a true masterpiece of scribbling and code. Some of it I had learned to decipher over my eight years. But other parts of it were still a mystery. It could have been ancient Greek so far as I knew. There were red marks, blue marks and black marks, dots with lines connecting them, different lengths of arrows running across the pages connecting horses from one race to horses in another. Lists of horse names were in the margins. Each horse had x’s and o’s written next to them. Words like parley, daily double, trifecta and wheel categorized each list of horses. But the strange thing about it was that for some reason I knew it all made sense. It was a system, a system of handicapping that was his and his alone. You could say it was Pa’s bible.

After Papa finished up his ritual at the mantel, he came into the kitchen and sat back with the form. I had already poured my Captain Crunch in a bowl and loaded it down with sugar. I knew it would be a long day so I needed as much energy as I could store up. He picked up a pen and started in on the form. You could say it was a sort of mission.

“We need to get there early, Nick, before the first race,” Papa said as he flipped through the pages from race to race.

“Papa, can I borrow a C-note to bet my own horses?”

“When we get there, we need to stand by the paddock and just look at em,” said Papa. I knew he didn’t hear me.

He finished scribbling and I finished my Crunch and we loaded into our black Impala and headed down Rt. 50 along the Ohio, through Cincinnati and eastward to River Downs. Near Sedamsville he pulled a big wad of cash out from under the seat. A rubber band was tied tight around a big lump of fifties and hundreds. I’d only seen this amount of money once before, after a good day of sales at our family restaurant. He stuffed it into his front pocket. When we passed the water treatment plant on Kellogg, less than a mile from the track, I started to feel we were headed for great things.

“We’re gonna nail em today, Nick!” Papa said as he gripped the steering wheel with excitement, his knuckles turning white with anticipation.

“Will we make it before post time?” I asked.

“Ahead of time and then more,” he said. “Ten races with plenty of chances.”

We zoomed past Coney Island and soon pulled into the parking lot next to River Downs. We left the Impala there in the lot and walked with fierce determination to the gate, paid our entry fee, grabbed a free program and checked the morning odds. Papa had already done his homework. We walked over to the paddock where the horses and jockeys scrambled through last minute strategy. Trainers talked with owners. Owners talked with jockeys. Jockeys talked with other jockeys. All these back and forth discussions took place with heads bent down and hands covering mouths. It all was a big secret and no one really knew what the other was really thinking.

“Here’s what we need to do, Nick? I got it all figured out,” said Papa. “Pretend the horses are on a basketball team. All we have to do is choose the horse who would be the centre of the basketball team and that’s our winner.”

What a brilliant idea, I thought. I played basketball. I knew exactly what it takes to be a good centre, tall with long skinny legs and a strong upper body. Number seven, Come Darling, easily fits the bill.

“I don’t have number seven anywhere on the form, Nick,” Papa said. He pulled the racing form out to verify. Sure enough, he had a big arrow pointing to number five. He brought out a pen and drew a big ring around the horses’ name, Corktown Hero. We had our horse and he told me to wait and he walked up to the betting window. He came back with a handful of pari-mutuel tickets with all kinds of combinations. Number five with all the horses in the second race for the daily double. Number five with every horse in the first race for exactas. Number five with numerous horses for trifecta possibilities.

“What happens if five runs out of the money?” I asked.

“Let’s walk up the grandstand a little so we can see the race better,” Papa said. I knew he wasn’t listening.

We climbed the grandstand, up to where we could see the oval track and tote board in the infield. The first race was on the turf. Come Darling pranced in front of us with his long legs and upper body strength. The smell of horse hair and straw was back in my head, but this time it was for real. Soon, the horses were loaded into the starting gate and we waited which seemed like an eternity for the horses to be released.

Corktown Hero jumped out slow from the gate and by the time they entered the first turn, he was four lengths from the lead.

“Don’t worry, Nick, that’s where he should be, he’s a closer,” Papa said. “Hold on to your britches.”

I reached down and held on to my britches for good luck. Corktown fell back five lengths down the backstretch, but around the third turn the gap closed and, quick as you can say “I told you so”, Come Darling flashed like a lightning strike past the rest and was two lengths in the lead in the final turn. Down the homestretch they flew. Come Darling won by three and paid thirty-six dollars to win. Corktown Hero finished second from last, ten lengths off the winner.

The day went on like this, back and forth from the paddock to the grandstand. We hadn’t a winner by the time the tenth race was twenty minutes away from post. Papa’s racing form was smothered with all kinds of pen marks, coffee stains, cigarette burns, and drips of mustard from hot dogs we bought minutes before the third race. Our funds were running low. The wad of cash was now a few bills. Papa no longer needed a rubber band to hold the bills together. We were desperate.

Then Papa came up with another idea on how to pick a winner.

“Nick,” he said, “go into the men’s room. Look and see which stall is the first one that is occupied. Then come back out and tell me.”

A row of stalls ran down the right side of the room. I glanced down and looked for feet under the doors. The first three stalls were vacant, but under the fourth one I saw a pair of black wingtips. I ran back out to Papa before anyone noticed me peeping under the doors.

“Number four’s the one, Papa!”

“Great job, Nick, number four it is!” he said.

He laid the form on a small table next to an escalator and spread out the bills we had left. One ten, two fives and four singles. The cash had dwindled down considerably from earlier in the day in Sedamsville when I first saw the deposit. It seemed so long ago. He took a pen from his pocket and put it behind his ear and studied the program. It was do or die, our last chance to make amends. Number four was named November Rain, morning odds at twenty to one.

Papa took the pen from behind his ear and drew a big circle around November Rain. “This is the one, Nick, I’m sure of it. If our horse can get a clean break out of the gate and if it can take an early lead in the first turn and if the favourite gets blocked along the rail and if the track is just right and if he’s wearing blinkers, I think we’ll be in the winner’s circle.”

“That’s sure a lot of ifs,” I said.

“That’s life, Nick, a lot of ifs.”

November Rain didn’t look like a center of any basketball team I ever saw. As a matter of fact, he reminded me more of a third string guard, bare-boned and short. He jerked his head back and forth during the entire post parade. By the time they loaded him into the gate, his flanks were drenched with oily sweat and white foam poured out from his mouth.

The race was six and a half furlongs, a mere sprint. November Rain was fifty to one at post time. I did the calculations in my head. Sudden wealth. I couldn’t wait to tell all my friends that Papa was going to buy me my very own racehorse and that I was going to name him whatever I wanted to name him and that our family had bought a vacation home in Miami Beach and they could all come down and visit me on Collins Avenue.

We were broke, not a penny left. Papa had his head low as we rode the escalator down to the exit. I had the feeling it would be a long walk back to the Impala. A tall man holding long helium balloons stood at the bottom of the escalator.

“Don’t forget your big balloons!” he yelled over the crowd walking back to their cars. “Take em home to your kids, they’ll love you for it. Only a quarter!”

Since I was a kid and since I was going home, I asked Papa if he had any change in his pocket. He pulled out both pockets and held them up in a pitiful way, showing me they were empty. We didn’t even have a quarter left.

But as we walked past the balloon man another man wearing a straw hat sat on a wooden chair. He held up a handful of tickets of some sort.

“Get your free ticket into Latonia while they last!” the man said. “Post time is at seven!”

Papa’s ears rose like a spooked thoroughbred. He walked up to the man on the chair and asked for ten tickets. He told the man that he needed extra tickets for the rest of his family.

“No problem, buddy.” The man reached into a small bag and pulled out a stack of tickets. “Have a great time with your family. There’s plenty there to take some of your friends also.”

We found the Impala and drove across the Ohio river to Latonia, another racetrack on the Kentucky side. I didn’t really know what was happening, but soon I would encounter my first lesson in real economics. After we parked the Impala in the racetrack lot we chose a position far enough from the gate not to be noticed. People unloaded from their cars and walked towards the entrance. The entry fee was five dollars. Papa reached into his pocket and pulled out the stack of tickets.

“Only two dollars, get em while they last!” Papa said. “It will cost you five at the gate!”

Before you could say “what a deal”, he sold all the tickets. We were in the money again, I thought.

“Fifty eight dollars, Nick, it’s enough to get us in and bet heavy on the first,” he said as he stuffed the bills into his front pocket. “It feels great to get a second chance.”

We bought a program for a quarter and two cokes for a dollar once we entered the track. It was twenty minutes before post. Bright lights on tall posts illuminated the track. Numbers designating odds shined on the tote board. The infield looked like it had been manicured with the grass cut sharp as a razor. Small neat hedges ran the perimeter of two lakes flanking the board. We leaned against the track rail as the trucks sprayed water out all over dirt. Then a man holding a bronze trumpet horn played the call to post and soon the horses for the first race came out on the track. It was like a circus where everything happens at the same time.

“Here’s the plan, Nick.” He sounded more serious than he had been earlier in the day at River Downs. “These babies in the first are running an allowance race, non claiming that is, all of them trying to break their maiden. We’ll bet ten across on this twenty to one shot. Then parley all of it in the second with the morning odds favorite number six. Then take the three-year-old, number seven, and wheel it for the daily double. Then we’ll nail the third with the super trifecta.”

He went on like this for five minutes or so. I really didn’t understand a word he said, but I believed him. At the end of the eighth race, we started to feel better about the day. We even hit the late daily double. We were back in the game. The wad of cash became thicker as the night continued. The singles became fives, the fives became tens and then the big bills grew into a big bundle of cash, green and thick. Papa wrapped a fat rubber band around the bills and stuffed it into his pocket.

We walked back to the Impala with our head high. It was our night. Papa lit a cigarette and threw the tattered racing form into the back seat. We drove out of the parking lot with the radio blaring. The Beach Boys were singing “Surfin’ U.S.A” and it made me think about waves, the blue water and white sand. Northern Kentucky was a long way from California but we still got the point and sang along with Brian Wilson and the rest of the boys. Then one of the most spectacular thing happened.

“Well, Nick, I think it’s time for a big ole’ steak dinner,” Papa said. “Let’s hit Jackeo’s Steak and Bake on Turfway across from the Holiday Inn. What do ya think?”

“Sounds great to me, Pops!” He didn’t have to twist *my* arm. I visualized a sixteen ouncer loaded with thick breaded onion rings and a baked potato with tons of butter and sour cream to spare.

There’s something special about having dinner with your dad late at night, especially after seeing him in action during the day and how hard he worked to get us back into the action. We ordered two sirloins. He didn’t even make me order a salad. Real men don’t eat greens. We talked about the upcoming school year, the basketball team, my friends, going on vacation after Christmas, and many other things. He listened to me in a beautiful kind of way, one of intent and total concentration. My belly was full, but I still devoured a big slice of chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream.

The waitress brought our check and we walked up to the register to pay. Papa reached into his pocket and brought out the roll of cash. He pulled the rubber band off and placed a hundred-dollar bill on the counter and told the waitress to keep the change. I felt good for him. It was the very first time in my life I had ever seen him buy anything. For Papa, it was only about the action.