

HOUSE JOCKEY

Jockey Charlie Beckler couldn't remember the last time he'd won a race and didn't care. He was sixty-two, divorced, no kids, collecting a steady paycheck as the House Rider for Garden State Park. In other words, shooting pool and playing cards in the jock's room from the first until the last race.

If a jockey got hurt or refused to ride and no one was willing to take his place, then the dentures came out and the silks went on old Charlie. This was rare; most jockeys jumped at a chance to ride, even on a longshot, cuz you never know, you might get lucky. Therefore, Charlie only had to be inconvenienced with riding in an actual race maybe two, three times a month, tops. Suited him just fine. His career was over, he'd never been a superstar, never rode in a Breeder's Cup or Kentucky Derby. These days all he wanted was his weekly paycheck and to win a hand or two at the card table.

And then freakin' Bud Matteo had to go and name him on a horse. He was happily creaming Jacinto in a game of pool between races when the hotshot young jockey asked, "You see tomorrow's entries?"

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"No," Charlie shrugged. He hadn't been listed on a horse in over five years so he no longer bothered reading the race entries. He was the last resort, not the first choice for trainers when it came time to select jockeys for their horses.

"Bud Matteo's named you on his horse in the sixth."

"Yeah, right, Kid," Charlie snorted. "Takes a better distraction than that if you wanna beat me at pool."

"No fooling, man. Look."

Jacinto produced the race entry sheet from his back pocket and handed it to Charlie. He slipped on his reading glasses. Crap, it was true. That was his name all right, listed next to some creature called Silk Castle.

Huh? He knew Bud, of course, everyone on the New Jersey racing circuit did. He'd trained several decent horses back in the day. Heck, Charlie had even ridden some of 'em. So what gives? Surely Bud knew that he was just the House Rider now, the guy who stuck around to ride the last race longshot on a rainy Saturday night.

Enjoying his confusion, Jacinto clapped him on the back and said, "Sure hope your Medicare's paid up."

"What are you talking about?" Charlie asked.

"That horse, Silk Castle, he's loco, man. All us jocks went down to the Stewards office, said no way Jose would we ride 'em. Guess that's why Bud put you on."

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It was starting to make sense now. And though Charlie knew he'd later regret it, he had to ask, "What's wrong with him?"

Jacinto took his time chalking up his cue stick and even longer to answer. He leaned over, took his shot, missed.

Jacinto straightened up and gave him a twisted smile. "You remember Tom Carter?"

"Of course. What a tragedy."

"That's the horse that did it."

Charlie blinked. Maybe he needed a hearing aid. It couldn't be, could it? He knew the story, of course, everyone did. Tom Carter had been the leading rider at Monmouth Park when one of his mounts had flipped upside down in the gate, crushing and killing him. Everyone assumed that the horse had been seriously injured and euthanized.

It wasn't. It was Silk Castle. And he was riding it.

* * *

The following night, no less than three jockeys clapped him on the shoulder and whispered condolences while he dressed for the sixth race. In freaking neon pink and lime green silks, no less. Could it get any worse?

Charlie felt a little better when he made his way out to the paddock and got his first, head-on view of his mount. He sucked in his breath. The horse was postcard beautiful - copper

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chestnut coat, shapely head sporting a full blaze and white stockings on all four legs.

Maybe Jacinto and the other jockeys were just screwing around with him..

And then his mount pranced past and Charlie saw the hard evidence - scars traversing his flanks and hind legs from the starting gate accident. Crap, it was true.

Forget Medicare; was his life insurance up to date?

He felt someone shaking his hand and snapped back to reality. Bud Matteo enthusiastically pumped his arm up and down and spouted instructions, none of which Charlie heard. He couldn't tear his eyes away from his horse's hindquarter horror show, envisioned himself squashed beneath one thousand pounds of Thoroughbred and a gravestone reading, "Charlie Beckler, 1936-1998."

Bud's next words certainly didn't help: "We've nicknamed him Vietnam, 'cuz he looks like he's been in a war - and lost."

Charlie's stomach lurched; he tried to convince himself that it was the damn taco he'd had for dinner.

"Riders up!" yelled the paddock judge.

The next thing Charlie knew, he was on top of the psycho-horse, being towed to the gate by Bud's ponygirl, Rose on her bombproof Clydesdale-cross. Every couple of strides, she'd

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sneak a nip from her flask. He considered asking her for a sip; he sure could use a drink right about now.

As soon as they reached the starting gate, they were immediately surrounded by a phalanx of three assistant starters, geared to the max. Chained lead shank. Twitch. Blindfold. Whip. Only thing missing was a cattle prod.

No wonder the horse was freaked out. Charlie felt a stab of empathy for what would probably be his final mount. Ever.

One of the assistant starters reached for Vietnam's lead and the horse instantly froze up.

Shit. He was gonna flip if Charlie didn't think of something.

"Rose," he barked, "get this bastard as close as you can to the gate, then cut him loose."

To the starters, he yelled, "I don't want none of you laying a hand on him, just leave him to me."

From the looks he got, everyone clearly thought ol' Charlie had gone senile. Tough. He'd show them - Vietnam was going to walk right into the gate because, he, Charlie Beckler, friend of animals everywhere, had treated him kindly.

Reality check - three feet from the gate, Vietnam reared. Charlie instinctively vaulted from the saddle, landing on his feet with Olympic gymnast grace. No way was that bugger flipping on top of him.

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But Vietnam didn't flip over. Instead, he remained perfectly balanced, front legs neatly tucked up, like a Lipizzaner. Damn horse belonged in a circus.

When Vietnam finally touched down, the three starters jumped into action - one grabbed his bridle while the other two locked arms behind his ass. Together they drag-shoved the rider-less horse into the gate and closed the doors.

And now it was Charlie's turn. He simply stood there, looking up at the starting gate, as spooked as his horse had been.

"Need some help getting up there, old man," one of the starters teased.

Yeah, nothing to it, Charlie thought, just have to scale up the side of the starting gate and climb back on the horse of doom.

"Come on, you're holding up the race!" someone shouted.

Charlie took a deep breath and scrambled onto the gate. He paused, looked down at the snorting, pawing equine time bomb in gate stall below.

And lowered himself into the saddle.

Vietnam tensed, gathered himself, ready to spring.

This was it, he was gonna die...

Then the gate flew open and Vietnam sprang forward instead of upward.

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Saved! Five strides later, Charlie realized that he was still alive, still in the saddle and in front? What the hell?

Most Thoroughbreds run out of instinct. The truly great run simply for the joy of it. Apparently, Vietnam ran out of blind fear. Not the best race strategy but it was working. Anytime another horse got within a length of him, Vietnam would panic and sprint away.

Charlie hunched down, held on, and counted down the furlong poles - five-eighths, half-mile, three-eighths - not long now, just had to make it around the turn and his trauma would be over. That is, assuming Vietnam didn't jump the inner rail or bolt to the outside fence, of course.

He felt Vietnam start to drift out.

"Oh no you don't!" he screamed, cranking on the left rein with all of his one-hundred and fifteen pounds. Somehow, he got the beast to make something resembling a left turn, and then straightened him out for the stretch run. Charlie didn't dare look back or even uncoil his stick. They hit the finish line five in front.

A few yards past the wire, it suddenly dawned on him that, holy shit, he'd actually won on this nutjob!

And then he was airborne. He balled up, did a tuck and roll onto his back. He laid there for a minute, winded and wondering how that the son of a bitch managed to throw him.

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He heard the ambulance pull up, turned his head and saw the rear doors explode open and two overeager attendants spring out with a stretcher. Though Charlie refused the whole neck brace, backboard strap-in ordeal, he did take them up on their offer for a ride back to the grandstand. His injuries weren't anything that peroxide, aspirin, and shot of whiskey couldn't cure.

Bud met him in front of the winner's circle. "You OK?"

"Yup. Sucker wheeled on me just after the finish."

At that moment, the rider-less Vietnam charged by, stirrups flapping, with both outriders in hot pursuit.

Bud watched the chase for a moment, then clapped Charlie on the back and said, "Guess we don't get no win photo."