

Ponies

I'm going to catch hell for this later. My grandson Shane trails me down the sidewalk, and at a dark-tinted door I stop and say, "We're here." A small green sign glows: Off-Track Betting.

"No way!" he says. "I thought we were going to the senior center."

"Honey, this *is* the senior center."

He holds the door for me, and the warmth pours around us. Inside, a dozen lined faces with hooded eyes turn and most of them smile, especially when they see Shane. Twenty-one years old, but he's a baby in here. Lenny puts down his pencil and touches the brim of his fedora. Across the room, Beverly is flirting with James and Cesar and just glances at us. Dolores grins – she's got only granddaughters – and says, "Peg! Is this the boy you keep bragging about?" I introduce them and Shane is friendly and gracious and fidgets with his collar.

We hang our coats in the corner. "This reminds me of the post office," Shane says. Freddie still hasn't fixed the flickering bulb in the middle of the room, and everyone is washed in the same jittery gray light. Counters are strewn with racing forms and newspapers and pencil stubs. Bulletin boards have the day's races and flyers for home health aides and pinochle clubs. Near the back are a couple of electronic betting machines no one uses. Plastic chairs are bolted to the floor in rows facing the small televisions hanging from the ceiling, each screen showing a different racetrack, each track running ten or fifteen races in a day. Marisol takes up three seats, two for her and one for the handbag she's excavating. Raymond squints to see the harness race at Monticello and presses a small radio to his ear. I can hear muffled voices and the squeak-

squeak of sneakers on hardwood; Raymond loves basketball almost as much as horseracing. In the back, behind bulletproof glass, stands the new kid who handles the cash. I don't know his name. He blinks at nothing, half-awake, a government worker who can't wait to go smoke alone in his room.

Freddie comes from the back, carrying a broken television destined for the curb; Shane hurries to hold the door for him and I hear polite murmuring.

If he weren't here with me tonight, Shane would be home watching the Democratic debate, hypnotized in the glow of the red, white and blue banners and the shining faces with bright teeth. The other day he voted in his first presidential primary and seemed to stand straighter afterward. Yes, Shane, it's about time a black man or a woman is a major party candidate and perhaps the next president. And it's good a boy your age cares more about politics and his grandma than about drinking all night and chasing girls. I'm glad you finally got a haircut and shaved that patchy beard. I know you wanted to watch the debate with me tonight, and talk about it. But you haven't been disappointed by hundreds of debates exactly like this one. Real politics is what happens between people on our own sidewalks, our living rooms, our churches, our community centers. Even here, Shane, right here at the OTB.

I have so much to tell you.

Shane is peering around the room like he'll be tested on it. I see everything he's taking in, and I also see what he can't, because it's decades ago and miles away: the shine of the ponies' coats, the velvet swivel of their ears, the waves in their manes, the nodding grace of their gaits. I feel Daddy's arm around me tight and the crumple of papers inside his coat. I smell cut grass and hot salty popcorn. Across the noisy crowd I hear the horses' whickers and the drumming hooves in the dirt, dirt that flies in the summer wind and gets in my eyes. I see the

horses galloping in a great curve away and back again, all the time my heart pounding at their beauty and furious speed. Did we win, Dad? It doesn't matter, honey. Did you see how they ran?

I pick up a betting slip, a pencil stub and a racing form, its tissue-thin pages wrinkled with coffee stains. Shane stares at the betting slip. To him, it's an enigma of wordless red letters and empty ovals. I put on my reading glasses and flip through the racing form. Nothing too soon; I want some time. Here we go: "Aqueduct's coming up. The track will be soggy from the snow." I slide the booklet in front of Shane, pointing to the race. "Pick a pony. Pick a name you like."

He rubs the back of his neck. "But I don't know anything about horses."

"Doesn't matter. You pick a bad horse, you'll probably lose your money, but if he happens to surprise everyone and win, then you take home a pile of cash much bigger than what you bet." His brown eyes blink. They don't teach pari-mutuel betting at Queens College. "Those odds, you see, that determine the payout of each race, they change all the time, every moment, with every bet we make, from weeks ago when they set the schedule and print this racing form, to right up to the second the horses start running. You, me, everyone in here, everyone in every casino or OTB from New York to Vegas and everyone there at the Aqueduct" – I point to the televisions – "who just loves the track even in winter, every single one of us is changing the odds. Altering the outcome. We all affect what happens after those horses run like hell to cross that finish line."

"I guess I get it – my bet affects the payout. But that's all, right? It doesn't change what happens in the race. "

“No, but I like it because it’s a system that includes all, listens to all, rewards them in proportion to the risks they take.”

“So we’re all butterfly wings blowing our money on horses,” he mutters. I snort. He smiles that half-smile I can’t resist and looks back at the racing form. “These names are crazy.” He brushes a fingertip across the page. “Runnafowl, Push Up Jimmy, Sixtyseven Buick. OK, here – I wanna bet on this one. Cherry Danish.”

“Good choice.” I help him fill out the ovals on the betting slip. He puts five dollars on the line for Cherry Danish to win, and the kid behind the glass hands him a receipt. No names – not his, not the horse’s, only a string of numbers and letters that represents a nervous, powerful animal now warming up on a chilly night at the Aqueduct as well as the fleeting hopes of a good young man. Shane tucks the receipt in his wallet. I squint at the television and say, “Twelve minutes to post. Let’s get something to drink.”

At the counter I slip two quarters into the honor box and fill a styrofoam cup with Café Bustelo, then plunk in a honey-lemon cough drop from my purse. I call it a grandma’s toddy. It feels fine going down, eases my stomach and my sinuses and doesn’t smell quite as bad as the stale mop-water reek in here. Shane buys a Coke from the machine, sinks onto a chair and glances wistfully at each television screen as if by some miracle one has switched to Democrats. It won’t happen. All around us, delicate ponies clamber through the cold evening, the jockeys’ colors looking faded.

I realize I need to use the bathroom. Shoot. I say, “Hold my coffee, please – I’ll be right back.” He sniffs the cup and makes a face. I chuckle and walk away.

They still haven't replaced the bathroom mirror. After I wash my hands and pat my hair, I gently touch my face. I wonder how it looks. Pale, probably. Tired. Has he noticed? The light in the OTB is indiscriminately unkind; it makes us all grayish and old.

I leave the bathroom and see Shane has slid over a few seats and he and Raymond are leaning together and frowning. I hear Raymond: "... season was over already. Ain't surprised they traded Kidd."

Shane nods. "Was gonna happen sometime." I don't think he even likes basketball. I'm back, so Shane says to Raymond, "Thank you – pleasure talking to you."

Raymond says, "Anytime, son." Shane gives him a politician's too-wide smile. He's practicing. I don't like it.

We go back to our seats. Then Shane twitches and reaches for his jeans pocket, the gesture that tells me his phone – his leash – has vibrated with a call or a message. Christ, seems like a minute can't go by anymore without someone, something, interrupting us. He looks at me. "Um ... "

I'm jealous, but a grandma can be indulgent, too. I tell him, "Go ahead."

In half a second he's flipped open the phone and grins, his face lit with more energy than I've seen yet tonight. "One of my friends texted about the debate – he says 'Come on, let the man get a word in.' Must be getting hot in Cleveland." Shane types a reply with a quick thumb. A few words without context: political discourse for a new millennium. But I'm kidding myself if I think my generation knew how to dig much deeper. He looks down when the phone buzzes again, then looks away, unfocused, and says, "They've got strong voices, both of them." Then he flicks his eyes right into mine. "Y'know, you never even told me who you voted for in the primary."

I smirk. "It definitely didn't matter in New York."

"Yeah, but you always say to vote for the best candidate regardless. That's what makes it count, what gets you heard."

"Well, that's what I did." Then I wink and take a sip of cough-drop coffee.

He says, "Me, I voted to make history."

"Good." I almost say, every vote makes history as soon as you yank that red lever. Makes history and is history. After the inauguration we'll find out the whole rotten machine there in Washington and Albany and City Hall never stopped humming, and nothing's changed. Every penny we bet on horses has more of an effect, in the end, than any vote. Butterfly wings, like you said, Shane.

On the television, ponies are warming up at the Aqueduct. They are living sculptures, hard lines of muscle and soft brown eyes. I'll miss this place. Shane follows my gaze and says, "Look, it's number four – Cherry Danish. That's my horse." A feisty reddish brute.

"We're not so different from those ponies, if you think about it." He turns to me. "Beautiful animals. God's creation, each one. But – they're trapped. Running in the same circles over and over, doped up, blinders on, whipped and breathless, caught in the excitement of the race." On the television, two horses prance side by side, tossing their manes. Shane, beside me, is still. I say, "They are beautiful, but the system is ugly, and they can't escape. And me, I can't stop watching. I never could. Addicted to the spectacle, I guess."

He touches my knee. "The system, eh, Grandma?" I shrug. He says, "At least the one we're trapped in is a democracy."

“Oh? Equal rights, equal responsibilities, equal representation, equal protection under the law?” He’s young but he’s not naïve. I’m surprised we haven’t had this conversation around the Sunday dinner table, but then I think of my daughter’s face, her grinding jaw, and I’m not surprised anymore.

Now he shrugs and says, “Well, it’s not perfect, but at least it’s something.” I look away and stay quiet and feel an old anger burning. He continues, “And I don’t think we’re so blind and helpless. People debate. They take action. They protest. They – they don’t give up.”

Why did I mention anything? He has years to turn sour. Above us, the ponies trot.

Finally he says, “We weren’t supposed to come here tonight.”

“That’s right.”

“Told Mom we were going to the senior center.”

“Mm-hmm.” And I will hear about it from Kathleen, too – she’s got as much mercy as a brick falling from a tall building.

“She hates the OTB, y’know. But I don’t see what’s so bad about it.” He’s looking around at the people in here, hair gray or gone or store-bought, and at all the 13-inch screens showing essentially the same story, over and over. I wonder what Kathleen’s told him. My social security drizzling away, not much, really just a little, one race at a time. It won’t matter. I wonder what else she knows. Probably more than I think. Children, they snoop, they wheedle their way to the truth. Shane asks, “Do you ever go to the races?”

“No. Not in years.” Decades.

“Well, maybe we could, when it gets warmer. I’ll take you.”

Sweet boy. He certainly doesn't know. "That's OK, hon." I pat his knee, then lace my fingers around my coffee cup. He slumps a little. Then I say, "I promised my mother I'd never go there again – after what happened to my father."

"Huh?"

I look him in the eye. "My dad ran numbers for the track."

"Wait, wasn't he a mailman?"

"He was. Guess it was a side job."

"He told you?"

"No. My mother told me. And she had to keep explaining it over and over, because I just kept asking, because I couldn't believe Dad was gone."

I notice Shane is holding my hand now. And Marisol nearby is probably listening, but it's nothing that matters anymore. Everyone's gone. Shane's forehead is all crinkled as he asks, "What do you mean? What happened to him?"

"I'll never know. One night he just didn't come home." I take a weak breath. "In the morning I heard Mom crying in the kitchen. She sent us kids upstairs but I heard the front door and quiet voices talking. Later, when she told us he was gone – she never said 'dead' – her eyes were dry. She turned hard as ice in that one morning."

Shane sighs. "No one ever told me this."

"Mom made us promise never to go to the track again. Hell, after that, she didn't even let me ride the carousel." On the television, a gentle horse is walking, the jockey slouched and bored. I say, "But I kept my promise. I never went back. After Mom died in '75, we put both their names on the stone. And then I started coming here."

“Why? After all those years?”

“Because going to the races with my dad was my best memory from when I was a kid. I couldn’t be angry anymore. And I earned this.” This room: grainy televisions, buzzy lights, gray linoleum, cheap coffee, sour smell of unwashed corners. These faces: Raymond, Dolores, Lenny, Freddie, Marisol, James, Cesar, Beverly, all of them. I’ll hold on as long as I can.

“Grandma.” I look back at him, at his serious eyes. He says, “I’m really sorry about your dad.”

“Thank you, honey.”

“And Mom’s wrong about this place.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s just another place people gather, people with something in common. Even if that something is gambling and smoking, well – they belong here. I belong here. And we talk, we laugh.” I grunt. “And we vote.” He nods, staring ahead. He’ll think of me here, now, tonight. As real as I ever am in my dining room chair. Then I say, “But the OTB is dying.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a losing business. Not even a business, really – it’s a government agency and it’s always on the chopping block. Probably won’t last another year. Albany doesn’t make enough money on it.” I sniff. “Enough money off people like me, who just want a place to be warm in winter and cool in summer, somewhere with each other.” I see Marisol watching me and nodding.

Shane tilts his head the tiniest bit. “Will you be sad, you and your friends, if you can’t come here?”

“Just find someplace else, I guess, but I’ll miss the ponies.” I picture a deli or a dollar store right here, with this same cracked linoleum. Maybe the sound of pounding hooves will linger, somehow. Like the scent of my coffee. One minute to post. “Shane.”

“Yes?”

This is really why we’re here. And I can’t get the words out. I love this boy. Hell, knowing, not knowing, pretty soon it won’t matter. He’ll be in other places with other people, remembering me, and making real change happen the only way it ever does: quietly, powerfully, one conversation at a time.

I say, “It’s post time. Our race is about to start. And after it’s over we’ll go home and watch the rest of the debate, OK?”

He shouts, “All right, Grandma!” and we high-five. Maybe I’ll tell him tonight. But not just yet. Not until our ponies have their chance to run like they were born to run.

We look at the television and I put my arm around his shoulders. Then I hear the bell and Cherry Danish bursts out strong from the gate. We stand up and I hear myself yelling, “Go! C’mon, damn you!” Shane laughs. The horses round the back and their images are small and blurry in the cool humid night. As they come around to the home stretch, I see Cherry Danish has fallen behind. A gray pony streaks from the outside and wins by a good three lengths.

I look at Shane. He’s grinning and says, “I lost. But it’s exciting to watch them run, isn’t it?”

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