It's Not Easy, Homer Böhmer

Regarding the life of Wilhelmina Byrd Crutchfield, christened by her equestrian maestros, grade-school nuns, and historical researchers as WilliByrd, the first person I interviewed was a certain Kentucky jockey entering his twilight at the Clearwater Retirement Pasture. It's been said of that entire central-eastern splay of Appalachia, that 12 million acre, dollar-green picnic blanket unfurled to smooth out the Smokies, that God carved its bones from an old hickory log. The valley goes down smooth like bourbon. It leaves a nutty aftertaste as you drive beneath the alternating tree-shade, past pastures where hobbling racehorses from the Kentucky Derby shared a retirement with their arthritic riders. Together, they engaged daily in a who-knows-how-much-longer goodbye kiss to the world.

There, my interpreter and I spoke at length with a much-wrinkled paraplegic, Mr. Homer Böhmer, who, leaving Germany during the Second Reich, came to work as a stable hand in Kentucky. After a series of freak lightning storms struck down the numbers one, two, three, four, five, and six racehorses in the state, Mr. Böhmer entered into the Kentucky Derby his own horse, Summer's End. A modest performance by Summer's End at the Derby caught the impression, tutelage, and eventual employment of Silas Crutchfield, renowned Louisville horse trainer and father to WilliByrd.

Here are Mr. Böhmer's amended words.

WilliByrd Crutchfield was an equitarian. When she touched a spitzenhorse, she made communion with it. When she rode, she, how do you say, transubstantiated? Like the little fat caterpillars that munch on prairie grass and in August are reborn as monarchs. A lepidopterist preacher once told me that monarch transformation is a contagious syndrome, that it has been documented to pass from butterflies to the trees they congregate on. Ah, you do not believe me, fraulein? There is no need; watch with your eyes. Whenever the monarchs visit Kentucky, every year, the leaves morph to match their wing colors – both the sad, rusted kind of orange and the mushmelon golden kind. And so I say to myself, perhaps their syndrome can pass onto us as well. To alchemize our souls. I don't know – I'm just a puzzled old man.

In those mariposal August days of 1915, I'd leave my Louisville flat with the sunrise and mosey up the road to Herr Crutchfield's stables. I wore my cap and carried two apples, three carrots, and a potato in my sack. My left pocket bulged with $50 – my entire life savings, while my right pocket bulged with Grandmother's shclinkelkarvingknife. Just three

years earlier, you would see me baling hay on the Böhmer family farm near Heidelberg in Germany. One year later, you would see me on that same farm, this time torching it as a member of the US Cavalry. I did not want to fight in the war, but was compelled to in 1916 when a mob of bourbondrunk bumpkins stormed over from the enlistment booth and hung my poor companion, Heinrich, from a tree. They draped his body in an American flag.

Although I could not read them at the time, I had clipped out the newspaper articles to prove he was lynched.

But you are a colored woman! You must have felt those days even worse than I. I do not understand it, the way you are treated here. In Germany, we did not do such things to colored people. I do not understand it.

1915 was my half-halcyon in America sandwiched between two Germanies – the farming nation and the battlefield nation. I was just an immigrant of nineteen, couldn't speak worth scheisse, couldn't write worth scheisse. I read through the entire collected works of my namesake that year without understanding. Why, I still don't understand even today, mind you.

After arriving at Herr Crutchfield's stables each morning, I would remove my cap and bale more hay for the spitzenhorses. Like the thousand different barks of a hound, a spitzenhorse has different snorts and sneezes and whinniwhinniwhinnies for its different moods. And one day I walked in to hear the humming of my workingmansong broken by two dozen horses all whinniwhinniwhinnying for their lives.

"My sweet Summer's End, what is the trouble?"

I saw her hulking shadow crumpled on the ground and in a snap wrapped five fingers around my schlinkelkarvingknife.

"Who's there?" I called.

I laid a hand on Summer's End's rear end. Her caramel velvet skin radiated fever. Her hindquarters and four armpits sweated out a soapy mineral lather as she quook. Those same hindquarters had pounded the racetrack just last year in the Kentucky Derby; they had contracted and loosened with tendons working like the ropes of a ship, on a racetrack built for males. She had earned her place among the elite few of the female spitzenhorses – Watermelon and Bronzewing, who earned 7th and 3rd last year, and this year the first ever female to win the Kentucky Derby, a filly named Regret.

Summer's End came from nothingness. Summer's End was why I had a job.

I did not anticipate her kinderbaby to come so early.

Calling out, I took the broom and swept out the dirty hay from her stall and ran for the water spigot, filling a bucket and then proceeding to scrub my hands and then the brick floor of her stall. I sprinkled lime – one toss, two tosses, there was no time for more – and then I gently sponged her belly and swollen udders with soap. I should have made all the preparations last night; I would have had I known. Her tail flicked back and forth angrily, and I quickly bound it with a spiral of linen so the hairs wouldn't interfere with her mare-parts. Summer's End stood and, giving a cry, she kicked out a leg that would have pulped my skull had I been standing a half-meter to the right. I understood and left her with her privacy. My neighbors, they say I do not understand English, but nobody says I do not understand the language of the spitzenhorse.

I noticed a trail of fluid winding from the stall that had already dried dark. She must have broken sometime last night. How long had she been in labor for?

How long *should* she have been in labor for? Shouldn't the kinderbaby have poked its head out by now? I heard a heartbeat bumbumbumbumbumbum in my ears. In my mind, I was reaching into her schnitzel and finding the foal stuck.

Once again, I eyed my schlinkelkarvingknife.

Summer's End continued to whinnwhinniwhinny, and the neighboring horses clapped the brick floor, snorted, and shifted.

This was a job for Herr Crutchfield, not for me. But Herr Crutchfield didn't come in until 9 AM; right now he was driving his WilliByrd back from the hospital. I paced through the stalls, hands on my head, exhaling while Summer's End cried. And what's more, while pacing, I passed by yet another stall, this one belonging to WilliByrd's favorite spitzenhorse, Godiva Sweet. And empty. One steed missing, and another in labor.

I walked over to the mirror and stared at myself, blade tremoring in hand. What would Herr Crutchfield do if he arrived at 9 AM and found I had performed a Caesarean section on our best spitzenhorse? And if I did nothing and the kinderbaby was not delivered – which was the worse of the two?

"Saint Eligius, what am I to do?" I looked to the ceiling.

Somewhere outside, a pair of lips kissed to a whistle, cheeks puffed with pent-up sighs, and inside the silver mouthpiece a little ball bearing gave a shatter-the-glass pixie laugh.

A whistle? Who was blowing a whistle at this hour?

I undid the window latch and threw it open to see a Renaissance cherub painted within the gabled frame, an angel amount saddle-backed Godiva Sweet. It was WilliByrd.

When the whistle left Herr Crutchfield's lips, Godiva Sweet exploded from her box. She was lightning first, thunder second.

WilliByrd rode under the sunrise and, projected by it, her centaur shadow revolved around her about the racetrack like the rotation of stars she'd gaze at from the bluegrass after every barbecue.

Her hair whipped over her face and eyes. The movement shook off her ribbon, and she had a mane alongside her favorite spitzenhorse. Wind has a way of rigidizing things – arms lock, jaws clench, flags glassify on their poles.

And limp little girls sit tall.

A two-year lifetime of prancing, trotting, galloping in mud, in leaves, in snow, had turned Godiva Sweet's bones to iron, her muscles to braided rope, wrapped in a close fit that held taut no matter the pounding on the cocoa-powder dirt. The morning's dew dark-streaked the racetrack like Grandmother's chocolate streusel mix when she'd first drop the egg yolks in, and squelch squelch little heart-shaped hoofprints are stamped into it.

Godiva Sweet pounded faster into the second lap, and the thundering was a never-ending lurch, each hoof-fall coming down hard and clacking WilliByrd's teeth together and oof-ing the gasps out her mouth. With each clop, step, rip, fly, oof, and each time she tried to make a smile that was promptly oof-ed away one heartbeat later ba-bum ba-bum ba-bum, the smile widened and the cheeks rouged. Each time she tried to laugh, the wind vacuumed it up, and each time the laugh grew happier and happier. Smiles accumulate like water when you take them away. When they break, they do so in a flood.

When WilliByrd passed her father for her third lap, I already knew it would be the last. Herr Crutchfield could never put a limit on her riding, but I sensed her crescendo had already come and gone. That's how racetracks work – they are machines that raise mountains inside of us.

Another shriek from the stables woke my ears.

"Herr Crutchfield!" I ran to him. "Summer's End, she's been in labor since at least midnight, and I, I don't think the foal is coming out."

He turned away from his daughter, smile fading when his eyes came to rest on me.

"Think I don't know? Don't trouble me, I've seen to her."

"I scrubbed everything, I sprinkled lime, I bound her tail. But she might need experienced hands –,"

"Don't chew your cabbage twice. Saw to her this morning."

"Weren't you at the doctor with WilliByrd?"

"Not today," his smile returned. "I'll check Summer's End in a moment. Breathe, son. Unbutton yourself. I know what it's like to have a baby."

He spat out his tobacco.

When his kinderbaby crossed the finish line, Herr Crutchfield ran to grab the reigns.

"That a girl!" he called, handing WilliByrd her hat – one of those massively wide-brimmed derby hats with an entire bouquet of flowers smiling from the stitching. He guided the spitzenhorse back into the stables, and then in one leap, hoisted himself onto the saddle behind WilliByrd.

"Help us out, Homer, will ya?"

With a hand on Godiva Sweet to calm her, I unbuckled WilliByrd's legs from their leather braces – first the left, then the right. She stared down at me, emotionless, like she was looking at a beetle on her shoe. On each leg, three belt buckles lashed her ankles, shins, and knees to iron rods. Once the buckles came loose, her legs hung limp. Herr Crutchfield grabbed her in a bear hug, her face just as blank. He snapped at me and pointed to the corner. This whole time, I had not noticed the wheelchair.

I wheeled it over, and Herr Crutchfield, grabbing his daughter by the armpits, lowered her. I set her in the wheelchair. Her eyes did not flicker up to me; they were hard and forward and piercing.

Us equestrians, we have an event called the handicapped derby, where we try to equify the spitzenhorses by strapping more weight to the faster ones and less weight to the slower ones. My boss, he would pound his fist and yell, "I didn't raise these horses for shackles!" He once ordered me to remove the weights, and little WilliByrd, how she loved the handicapped race, she spat a yolk of phlegm onto my shoe for destroying equity.

That afternoon, when Herr Crutchfield finally reached in and pulled new life from Summer's End's rear end, he left me to deliver the placenta.

"Any thoughts on names?" I called after him.

"This one is yours, Homer," he said. "You have first say."

I nodded.

"Thank you, Herr Crutchfield."

I named the kinderbaby Eligius.

I spent the next few nights at the stables watching over Eligius, and when I finally returned to my flat in Louisville a few days later, I laid in my bed and shook.

After that day, I grew accustomed to commuting by foot each morning, cresting the border into hill country with the Ohio River floodplain at my back, catching the shadow of a forward-leaning centaur circling the distant racetrack. I would push open the great barndoors, set down my lunch sack, take off my cap, my scarf, my pea coat, shake off the orange leaves, and WilliByrd's dead glare would follow me. Gradually, we learned to look each other in the eye. She had a face like my grandmother – pocked with poxboilscars, drawn taught around skeletal cheekbones, making her mouth and nose appear plump in proportion. Her head so much resembled her skull that I assumed she was born that way, that she had never lived for a time whole and round and smiling. But four years later, after I returned from Europe in a very similar wheelchair, I would see her as a woman and be proven wrong.

As the Fall of '15 wore on, WilliByrd frequently came wearing a surgeon's mask and would wash her hands after riding. I believe she once infected me with the sniffles.

Most weekends, Herr Crutchfield, WilliByrd, and I would pack into the auto and go on a drive to some racetrack – Churchill Downs or Douglas Park, mostly. Similar to when she rode her favorite spitzenhorse, WilliByrd transformed into a royal monarch in front of the crowds. When she wheeled onto the greenspace by the racetrack where all the spectators picnicked, each time dwarfed in the shade of a new pastel-flowered hat, the old ladies just about died.

"You dear kitten!"

"You certainly do know your horses, Miss Crutchfield."

"That is a simply tasteful hat, my dear!"

Everyone that met her became her grandmother, regardless of age or sex. Even the old men with mouths full of cigar and rolled sleeves and tussled hair to evidence the heroism in betting on spitzenhorses to do what they could not, even these men would go boggle-eyed in WilliByrd's sight. I would not hear a single damn, hell, or bitch in their mutterings.

The sweating bourbon glasses would accumulate on the tables, and the whiskeystones would clink, suddenly and seemingly ownerless.

"It must be the second coming; angels roam the Earth!"

They would play games with her and nudge their drinking buddies.

"Say, fella, hear that?"

"What?"

"It sounded like a little bird twittering."

"Well, I didn't hear anything."

And WillieByrd would throw back her head, pulling on their jackets. "I'm right here!"

"Did you feel a little breeze just now?"

"I believe so."

Some of their jokes were not so good. Once, an old man, overjoyed to share in all the smiles, walked up to steal her nose. WilliByrd just glared at him. He receded and did not appear again.

The younger women in the shoulder-draped satins whose feet bobbed to the jazz in their heads, champagne in one hand, were not as vocal toward WilliByrd, so she did not spend as much time with them. Unfortunate for me. I'd know, because I was her kniderbabysitter while Herr Crutchfield managed the spitzenhorses on the racetrack. My job was to contain her when the old ladies grew annoyed with her, when she clung on too tight to their floral-print dresses and followed the old men into the betting booths, begging them to repeat a joke. And it was also my job to peel her away when the sun set and the derby ended.

In January, Summer's End turned 5, same age as WilliByrd. At that age, spitzenhorses lose their speed. So we sold her to the US Cavalry.

Shortly after, I enlisted. You know how that story goes.

I only saw WilliByrd accidentally after the war. The first time was in Louisville, when I met her and her parents on their way to St. Olive of Champagne's for Sunday mass. Her face was peach-cheeked. She still wore her hats, as always, from a spectrum of flowered red – scarlet, wine, Tuscan, rosewood, vermillion. Herr Crutchfield and Frau cried when I

looked up to them from my wheelchair with my bombed-off knee-stubs, but WilliByrd was quiet. We met eyes.

The second time was after the stock market crashed, on Thanksgiving. I was at the train station holding up the backside of an apple crate where I had written: *I Speak Two Languages. I Fought To Protect Your Family. I Am A World-Class Jockey. All I Want Is A Job.*

I usually waited until the trains rolled in and passengers unloaded, then would try to tell them my story. And just like that, WilliByrd wheeled herself down the ramp. We met eyes. She'd returned to Louisville – she explained to me that yes she had found a job, that she'd been working for Eleanor Roosevelt as a cowgirl librarian in the Cumberland Mountains, that she had just quit. And I said, "How could you do such a thing?"

"How I got the job? My Aunt Harper lives there. She is – was – a government librarian, but she can't read. I was her other half. We rode our horses through the mountains to teach people how to read."

"Yes, but how could you do such a thing?"

She looked at the ground.

"I quit because my Aunt Harper is a criminal."

"Yes, but I repeat, how could you do such a job? In a condition such as yours?"

She was quiet.

"It's not easy, Homer Böhmer."

I figured she was lying, probably starving like everyone else.

She offered to bring me to her home as a Thanksgiving guest, although she did not have anyone to push me and could not push me herself. I refused.

She told me she knew a spitzenhorsemaster at the Clearwater Retirement Pasture who was very kind, and that she would write to them to inquire about my situation. A room was prepared for me at Clearwater, and I was living there by Christmas.

If there ever was a soul who could catch the syndrome of the monarch butterfly, it was her.

And that is all I can say of her.

You ask too much of me, Miss Hamlyn; I cannot speak anymore. I am ready to nap. Go out – drink, dance. Why do you sit indoors and interview a dying old man and ask all these questions about WilliByrd? Who was she to you?