



***High Fever: Installment #11***

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Before the first break, Roxy and Ann had gotten eight horses to the track. Each horse trained smoothly and the girls laughed and joked like 12 year old girls riding at summer camp. The barn was running like a well-oiled machine. They were in the office planning the next sets when Jude Keenan stormed in. He refused to acknowledge Roxy's presence and directed his comments but not his gaze to Ann while opening and closing the drawers on his desk, banging around as if to look for something.

"Are you in the habit of having our horses exercised by people who can tell other trainers how our horses are going?"

"Look, there is no way that I can get 14 horses to the track in one morning and I didn't see you hiring us any help. Plus it's only for a few days while..."

"While she gets a good look at all our stock and then tells her boyfriend which ones to claim?"

“Tony and I split up.” Roxy chimed in.

Jude still refused to look at her, instead snorted in disgust. “Roxy Ayers does NOT work for me – do you understand?” He turned and looked directly at a very surprised and frustrated Ann.

“Well, good to see that some people never change,” Roxy sighed. She turned to Ann “Sorry darling, it was fun to ride with you this morning. I’ll see you around.” Roxy mustered her pride and walked out of the office with her head down, but her back straight.

“What was that about?” Ann demanded.

“Does it bother you that you just don’t know everything?” He’d returned to shuffling through his desk, his back to Ann.

“No, it bothers me that I finally got some good help around here – one who can handle a horse and will show up for work and you run her off.”

“She ain’t much.”

“She’s one of the best hands around!”

“No, she’s a skanky whore.”

“Oh, I get it, it’s cool if you guys run around with anything that walks, but if a GIRL sleeps around, she’s useless?” Ann was stammering angry.

“I don’t make the rules little girl...”

“Hey, Boss, I think you had better come and see this.” Enrique beckoned to both of them from outside the door.

Pax Kristi stood panting in the middle of the walking ring. From each dilated nostril tricked thick yellow ooze. Her knees were locked and the only reason she was able to remain standing was because of it. Any attempt to pull her forward resulted in a deep, choking cough and staggering. Her ears hung sideways and her sides heaved with her labored panting.

“Let’s get a temperature on her and call the vet right away,” Jude barked.

Enrique had the thermometer in his hand, he showed it to Jude and to Ann. It read 105.2.

“Holy sh\*t.” Jude cursed and stomped his feet. “I want everything around that mare sterilized and only one groom to handle her, and with gloves. Do you hear me? Sterilize the goddamn brushes, the pitchforks – everything! Get that sick bitch out of my barn and to the hospital as soon as you can move her sorry ass.”

“You don’t know that it’s contagious.” Ann reminded him. But he was in no mood to be reminded of anything. He was envisioning his entire barn quarantined or sick and his chances of racing his barn put on hold until further notice. He pictured himself begging owners to be patient and it was not a pretty thought.

## **A Fine Scotch Whiskey**

Clive Ullswater surveyed his office as he stood up from his butter soft leather chair. Out the windows on one side of his office, he scanned the San Gabriel mountains as a backdrop for the lovely racetrack, a look over his shoulder showed the European style saddling paddock and the grave of Emperor of Norfolk, the best horse that racetrack founder Lucky Baldwin ever owned. Statues of Seabiscuit, George Wolfe and legendary trainer Charlie Whittingham and his dog

Toby were all within his gaze. He'd been General Manager of the track for going on 14 years now and as the track looked to change hands again, it was time for him to think about his next career move. Pity that as this post had served him well. He ran his fingers along the giant cherrywood desk, smelled the afternoon brew of espresso coming from the small kitchen that connected his secretary's office to his.

At 54, his trim midsection was still tucked neatly into the waistband of his meticulously cut Wilkes Bashford trousers. His linen shirt was pressed perfectly, perfumed slightly with French Lavender from his favorite cleaner. His pewter cufflinks belonged to his grandfather. Racing had been good to him. He liked the pace of five-month racing season and the weather at the sunny California track. He'd surrounded himself with management that gave him the respect due a general manager. He'd weeded out the ambitious, the troublemakers and the clever. His office was a calm and cultured place where a man could discuss important things – like golf and the economy. Where he could put his feet on the desk, pour himself a 3pm tumbler of a fine scotch whisky and watch the races go by. There were a few things he needed to do before he left, but yes, he would miss this place.

### Fine as Frog Hair

Ann drove into the tidy trailer park sifting through troubled thoughts.

Her dog heard her drive up and met Ann at the door to Pete's mobile home. All the madness of Ann's last couple of days vanished in a flash with Luke's manic tail wagging, happy howls and clumsy leap from Pete's couch. He lavished kisses on her face and throat and she bent down folding his head into her arms.

"Well Missy, ain't it good to be loved?" said Pete from his couch.

Between giggles she managed to struggle from the floor amid sloppy hound kisses. "How are you feeling Peter?"

“Fine as frog hair, darlin’.” He grumbled.

“Frog hair? Frog’s don’t have hair?” She panted, gently pushing Luke away.

“You can’t see frog hair because it’s too fine,” Pete laughed in between wheezes.

Ann was always charmed that Pete laughed heartily at his own jokes. It was endearing to her. She loved it when Pete would crack up telling her a joke that she had told to him recently.

“Well, we’d better get moving unless you want to be late to your doctor’s appointment.” Ann said.

“Don’t hafta worry about that. I done gone and canceled that meetin’ with the saw-bones,” said Pete.

“Why would you do that?” Ann asked.

“I’m tired of bein’ poked and prodded like an old pin-cushion. Those doctors and nurses treat you like you was nothin’ but a piece of meat. No dignity. So I fired ’em.”

“What about your prescriptions? How will you get the medicine you need?”

“I figure that pills never did much for my Donna, she died anyway, so what the hell can they do for me?” Pete looked at Ann defiantly. “Nope” he continued, “I’m too old to cure, you just leave old Pete be. I’ll be alright, don’t you worry your pretty little head. Luke and I talked about it and he agrees.” Pete reached out and stroked Luke’s silky long ears. Then he reached into the folds of the couch and produced a bag of ginger snap cookies. “Want one?”

“Pete!” said Ann, shocked. “You know you have to watch your sugar!”

“Listen missy, I spent 31 years of being a rider and watching my weight like a hawk. Can’t eat this, gotta purge that. No butter, no salt on my meat. When I quit ridin’ I ate like a king and every bite tasted like a treasure. It’s the same here with these goddamn cookies. Three years with watching my sugar and taking insulin and worried all the time. These cookies have never tasted so good and I aim to eat ’em and eat some more if I goddamn feel like it.”

Ann sank to the couch next to him and put her hand on his hairy wrist. “Oh Pete, I’m just worried about you. That’s all.”

Pete wouldn’t meet her gaze, he turned to watch the Dodgers on the television make a seamless double play. “Looks like the boys might have a good year after all.”

“Pete, we need to talk about your health,” she pleaded.

“Why?” he asked. “Why can’t we talk about baseball? Or take the dog for a walk in the sunshine? Or figure out your terrible love life? Why do we need to talk about my health? Let’s laugh and have some coffee, or pick winner for the Big ‘Cap and just forget about arthritis or blood sugar levels or bowel movements! Can’t you see that I’m tired of all this crap?”

“I’m sorry Pete, it’s just that...”

“Don’t be sorry girlie, just shut up!” Pete’s hands were shaking and so was his voice. The Dodgers were up and there were now two men on base. Both Pete and Ann turned automatically to watch the game. They sorted out their thoughts in silence until the commercial break when the TV erupted loudly into an ad for adult diapers.

“Ah hell,” said Pete disgustedly as he got up and went to the kitchen, dragging his bag of cookies with him.

“Hey, while you are in there, can you make us some coffee?,” asked Ann with a hopeful smile.

“Too goddamn hot for coffee now.” Grumbled Pete. Ann sighed, not sure what to say next. “But I got some coffee ice cream in the freezer.” Pete grinned from the kitchen like a naughty child.

“That sounds great!” sighed a relieved Ann.

Pete, Luke and Ann spent the next two hours locked in flowing conversation, jokes, stories, nostalgia, junk food, a win for the Dodgers and laughter. It was food for the soul for all three. Looking at her watch, Ann regretted that she would have to break the spell and bring them all back to reality.

“Sh\*t Pete, it’s four o’clock, I gotta get back to the barn for feed and medications.” Then Ann ventured a risky move. “Do you want to come with me?”

Pete wasn’t ready for the question and he sucked in his breath, retreated into the couch cushions and seemed small and frail.

“Sh\*t honey, I ain’t been to the track in a month of Sundays. I couldn’t go. Nah, you go on honey, I’ll keep Luke here with me.”

Ann pushed a little harder. “C’mon Pete, I’ll only be there for a couple hours and then we’ll be back.”

Pete looked at his hands, flexed his swollen, arthritic fingers and winced. He wiggled his purple

toes in his worn leather slippers. He exhaled loudly and looked Ann directly in the eye “Sweetie, I appreciate the offer. I really do, but I figure the track is done with me, and so I ought to be done with the track. You go along, I’m feeling sleepy. I’ll keep Luke here and we will take a good long nap.”

Ann felt heavy and sad. The worst part was that she knew it was true. Racing consumed your life, destroyed your body, paid off sporadically and picked your pocket constantly. The racing game threw out champion horses, talented riders, brilliant trainers or wealthy owners just as quickly and cruelly as it did penniless gamblers, crooked jockeys, junkie grooms and assorted lost souls. The track never forgave, but it always forgot. Ann knew that she had spent her whole career working harder, going the extra mile, grinding away to achieve respect in the game and yet she too, would be forgotten in an instant when she could no longer ride.

“Let’s check your blood sugar before I go,” Ann offered.

“Now pumpkin, you and I both know that I’m off the chart with all the crap we ate today. Why the hell do you want to rub it in? I ain’t planning on running a marathon this afternoon, I’m just gonna curl up here with this ol’ hound and sleep it off.” Pete yawned and rubbed his rheumy eyes and dismissed Ann with a raised eyebrow indicating that the conversation was over and it was time for her to go.

“Are you sure you want me to leave Luke?” Ann asked.

“Yup. He’s a lot better company than you or this damn TV – ya see, he knows when to shut up.” Pete winked and smiled as he pulled a greasy quilt over his shoulders and settled down into the couch. Luke jumped up and curled behind Pete’s knees. Ann walked over and patted Luke on the head and then quickly kissed Pete on the forehead. “Don’t go smoochin’ on an old man little pretty,” Pete mumbled with his eyes closed. “You just might get more than you bargained for.”

Both Pete and Luke were snoring as Ann grabbed her keys and headed to her car.

## May 2019 - A Damn Fine Hand

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