

HORSE TWO

a short story

by Anita Dime

- CHAPTER 1 -

Rain came down like piss from a race horse, fast and hard. I'd been wasting the minutes, trying to figure out what to do, which left me staring outside—folded paper on the seat next to me and coffee contrails, racing the Camels, keeping me company with the rain.

"C'mon, c'mon," he pulled a chair to the end of the booth, flipped over the paper, and sat down. Scanning the headlines, he said, "Odds are in our favor—our favor, Carl. Did you hear me?"

I just wanted to hear the rain. "For Pete's sake, Smitty, I heard you the first time."

"Race Five's got Special Dark Star or Nutty Buddy, something like that. You know, one of the Candy Lady's horses; she's got so many. Here. I'll show you." He turned over *the Racing Form*.

"This millionairess' husband croaks at fifty-something, leaving her a small, 3,000-acre Tennessee farmstead and thoroughbreds, all named after candy bars. Not one is a like War Admiral—geez, ain't he swift this year—but they're all consistent performers, collectively, when they're all running the same race. The odds sorta even out, and betting on any one of 'em, you'll make some dough."

I took another drag. Yeah, I remember this brood alright. They just named their latest colt "Nation's Tastiest." Well, I should say the nation named Nation's Tastiest; it was a radio contest, a publicity stunt to sell more candy bars, I suppose. But, also a replacement for last year's tragedy, a time I found difficult all around and try to forget daily.

Flipping pages, Smitty was instantly distracted. "Look, this race, number four. We got Sinbad Syndicate and Pollyana Piper. K, maybe not Pollyana, but Sinbad; I ... I can feel it—I really can."

"Horse is dynamite, you'll say. Smitty, take a good look outside already? The track is slop; fetlocks deep in mud. The water could be standing for all I know. I'm not feeling it today."

"Yeah, yeah, you're down. OK, you're down." He swigged from his flask and grated the chair legs as he pushed back from the table. "Look, I gotta make rent. Gotta do something. Well, be seeing ya'."

I fumbled with the open pack of cigarettes on the table. Crumpling the pack with my good hand, I slid across the booth, flipped a nickel on the table, fair size tip, and followed Smitty to the front to pay.

"Empty?" said Smitty. "Here, lemme get that for ya;" He opened a fresh pack and felt around for a light. Approaching the service counter, I leaned over the register, grabbed a box of matches from the fish bowl, and dropped what I owed.

Rain, pinking against the glass front door, smearing all the way down—cleansing rain. I took another drag.

- CHAPTER 2 -

Outside with a fresh cigarette, the world hung for a moment; nicotine buzzing, seething, heightening the senses.

“Smitty, you know, I can’t really explain it, but she’s here. I know she’s here. I can smell her perfume falling from every cloud,” I said, the scent of the wet pavement, the drop rolling down the seams of the awning. It all intensified, like a mute screaming. “There! ‘Cross the street, getting’ out of that cab. Wow! Just look at her. Will you look at her? Man, what a dish.”

Briefly, Smitty glanced over the top edge of the Racing Form. “Uh, yeah, good luck with that filly,” he said, leaning against the wall, flipping to the next page.

The cab rolled off the curb, revealing a red umbrella. She straightened with a small tote in hand, red radiating all around her. Her warmth drew me.

I raced across the street and stepped in time. “Lillian. Lillian, wait a minute,” I said.

“What the? How dare you!” She swung about, blonde curls bobbing and hellfire beading behind ten-cent lashes.

“Lemme get that bag for you,” I insisted, my eyes pleading in earnest.

“Help me? What’s that saying? ‘With a million-plus people floating in this sewer, you turn up,” she seethed, picking up the pace.

“Honey, wait,” I said.

“Wait? I waited for so long, holding my breath you’d come back. I turned blue.” She put the bag down, reached over, and took a long drag from my cigarette. “That’s the closest you’ll ever come to kissing me again.” She flicked it and walked on.

Arcing, it puffed out.

I stepped back against the lamp post. Silence. I didn’t know what to say, and then it was too late. She had decided on a new something and took it, anything that didn’t include me in the picture.

“Don’t worry.” I told myself. “It’ll pass.” The frustration will pass. It’s like a bus, rushing to get through the intersection and then lulling back into traffic on the far side. Some days, it’s just more of a nightmare than others when that intersection keeps widening and the flickering lights change.

Change. Yeah, that’s what I should do.

- CHAPTER 3 -

I remember it had been just another week at the track, just about a year ago now. Maybe talking with Smitty brought back the details, made them more vivid.

Smitty and I had ritually picked up *the Racing Form* at the train station newsstand. Then, studied it for hours trackside, marking in the margins, scratching out the dopes, and calling on everything we knew to pick each horse, leading to the critical questions: 1) Win? Place? Show? and 2) How much?

“Hey, look at Race Two, third horse down. How do you pronounce it?” asked Smitty.

Slowly, I enunciated, “Dancing Viceroy, a sovereign’s right-hand man.”

“A puppetman? Ah, you know, all this time I thought he was more than that.” He sniffed. “Less power than the king, eh? Guess that horse’s a dud,” Smitty muttered. He slashed through the horse’s name and scanned the remaining lineup.

Folding my paper, I scanned the stands and said, “Time is rounding to one. Let’s get down to the paddock.”

First race of the day. The chestnut with white socks, not certain how many hands, but tall, fidgety, prancing like my heart beat. Will he be the one? Purple silks on the three horse, a lilac in winter—romantic. Maybe he has the passion to make that final push rounding the last turn. Fifth horse, front right, is wrapped; could be wet, like he’s been standing in ice. Or just go for the pole starter, rail hugging, shortest distance around the track, if he can get out swift enough.

“I’ll be back,” said Smitty, as he houdini’d into the crowd.

Dirt track: gravel, clay, sandy soil—raked. Water trucks had come and gone, the groundsmen moving away the large rocks and filling in holes. Earthy, primal anticipation in the air—no premonition of the events to come. Virginal track. Pristine.

It was going to be good.

Horse Six paraded; jockey looked nervous and sullen, perhaps a morning quarrel with the owner or trainer? Grumblings ’bout the exercise rider not working ’im right in the 7a.m. breezes.

Smitty reappeared as abruptly as he had left. “Where’ve you been?” I asked.

“I went by the shed row, followed one of the grooms to the betting window. Tried to overhear what he laid down and do the same,” he responded. “I need this win; I just couldn’t leave it to chance.”

“Guess it was better than buying a Tip Sheet,” I thought. Every day that toothy, grinning Tipster from the gates smiled and called over the crowd, “Tip Sheet. Tip Sheet – One dollar.”, greasy he was.

“I need this race,” Smitty continued. “If that’ll give me the leg up, so be it.” Smitty was always scrambling to make end-of-month Carls. The liquor guaranteed half, and the others he paid as he could, resisting the assistance that some 130,000 families received in this town. His pride refused to let him step out on the dole.

Smitty turned around, looking back into the stands packed with racing fans. “Up there. Best seat in the house, eh?” Smitty jerked his head. I followed the sight-line to the small building, a tower beside the grandstand. “The caller sees best, don’t he? Like a crow’s nest at sea. Wonder how he gets up there?” The caller was new in the last year, a tension-building addition, which actually drew more of a crowd. “You know, you better get a move on. They’re starting to warm up on the back side, and you’ll want to beat the bell.”

I hurried off. With bets placed I rejoined Smitty back in our usual spot against the rail. Race after race passed by—rounds of pacing and scurrying to the betting windows in that half hour sliver between races. That last race came, releasing us from this momentary bliss, releasing us back to the daily drudge.

Here, in this place, anyone of us Plain Joes could make a doctorate decision and pick the day's champions, coming out on top, regardless of where we came from and where we were returning to. Though, it wasn't gonna to be today.

"You come in at all?" I asked, looking back through my ticket stubs.

"Nah. You?" Smitty said.

"Nah. Let's blow." A down-turned day, not so good.

- CHAPTER 4 -

The following week I took Lillian. Geez, Lillian, what a dream—dating six months and climbing. She had never been to the track before, and I thought the novelty of it all would drive her passion. She had never smelled the freshly groomed lawns and the wet track clay. She had never experienced this place of heightened energy, as all that entered surged with luck and faith in the four-legged gods and bet their savings for that moment to sit in euphoria with them.

The equine regal stance in the paddock is something to see at least once. His head is held high. Wish I could really feel that, not just posing.

I'd gone all out for this date: bought popcorn and even an official program at ten cents.

"Oh, it's so exciting!" she squealed, smashing her white pocketbook against my sleeve. We had seen the horses for this race already paraded. She had picked a gray with a well-sculpted haunch, standing fifteen hands high; its white star—yeah, a rarity—glistening as if a mystical unicorn stood before her, waiting to be adorned with a wreath of flowers and bathed in pink petals. I couldn't bear to tell her the field typically yielded to the browns, chestnuts, and bays.

It was truly a holiday. We strolled to the betting window. I'd usually never dream of placing a wager with more than two minutes remaining to post time, but I took my time with Lily, strolling to stand in line, her arm in mine.

From her handbag, she opened her silver, initialized cigarette case—probably the last guy's gift. She slid out a slim Lucky Strike. "You have a light?" she asked. I obliged, and she inhaled long and slow, looking like she was savoring this memory, and then turned her head away and politely blew smoke over my shoulder.

A shifty bald guy stood two ahead of us. Fists thrust deep into his trouser pockets, looking nervously at the board and nervously at the line. Like a sandpiper, he first stood on his right foot, then his left, looking around and through the people ahead of him and then back to the boards. "Ah, have your money ready, you fat cow!" he belched at the powdered lady in blue, accessorized in mink fluffs and hat netting, who finally laid down her bet. She sneered down her nose while his bald head grew redder by the second.

Anxiously, Lily gripped even tighter, a slight falter in her smile, but she clutched her two dollars, seeming to feel the life and death of it. She glanced at the board, and I sensed that even though she didn't know what the changes in numbering meant, she felt urgency with each turn all the same. She glanced down, smiling, and we stepped closer to the front. Things getting down to the wire—that bell.

Please don't ring too soon.

Bets placed on Aphrodite and pushing away from the counter, she said, "Sorry, I need to step into the ladies room. Which way is it?" I pointed, and away she went.

Crushing the program, I turned toward the great archway leading down to the track. I didn't want to let on to Lily, but I'd been on a losing streak. Even the sparkle of her eyes couldn't get it going.

"Hey, pal." A man tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, Pal. Tip Sheet's a dollar." There he stood, this gnarled trunk of a tree—a short, thick-necked guy with browned skin from standing day after day in the sun. "I foresee a future with you winning, Palie. I see you here often and I can tell when the luck is dry. Big race day coming tomorrow, Race Six—we can make it bigger. I want you to get Nutty Buddy out of the way. Think it over, and we'll set this win in motion." Tipster thumbed the stack of Carls in hand, counting.

So desperate I didn't think it through, I said, "Yeah, and how?"

Who the hell was this guy and what made him in the know?

"The groom for Nutty Buddy shares double duty. Get in there when he's out, exercising one of the others. Do it swift—close, before race time, and get out quick. The groom's name is Marty, a gangly raisin of a man that lullabies his 'babes' at night. He has vigilant watch when there ain't places to be getting the horses to. So, night time isn't a good idea. The more commotion of the day, the easier it is to blend in. You're average build, average looks, all around average. You'll work. Just make it quick."

Lily approached, clasping my hand. "Are we too late? I tried to hurry. Oh, hello," She smiled nervously.

"Hey, Doll. I'll be getting on." Tipster winked and sauntered toward the plaza.

The next heat entered for the post parade, dramatically striding in sunlight and silks. His head slightly curled, back slightly arched. Horse Six looked washy, nervous eye and shifting jockey—the pair circling anxiety stirring.

"He'll be a handful at the gate, you watch." I nodded.

They loaded, jockeys visualizing the course, when to wait and when to kick, forgetting the booze, agent finagling, and starvation to get in this saddle, praying for a time bathed in flash bulbs and crisp hundreds.

The starter, standing in his tiny, raised bandstand, poised to get 'em going. "Get that horse loaded!" he bellowed, motioning toward Horse Six in lime green and yellow. Rump through the gate, they were instantaneously released in nearly the same motion.

All nerves directed forward, thunderbolts of unfathomable magnitudes, a thousand pounds of flesh beating in our hearts.

The announcer called out positions and rail markers. Horse Four started bending out, edging so slightly toward a centerline at the second quarter pole, but so far by the third, Horse Five took the advantage, sliding through the gap. The jockey effortlessly, leading confidence—five horses remaining.

A notorious closer, Horse Five took his spot in the top three, white salts frothing, lathering on his underbelly and inside legs. Rounding the clubhouse, approaching the final stretch, he pressed—all others falling away. The clamorous roar of those gripping tight to tickets and railing, hailed their heroes in volcanic upheaval.

Crossing the line by a length and a half, an unearthly vision for most, but me and my morning glory balled my heart and trashed it once more—worse than being dumped by a dame.

My methodical wagering strategies had been torched in a day. My fever, audacity to believe that by throwing money into the wind, I could calm the storm. I just lost it all. I couldn't make it be. Desperately forcing luck, this was a new "place" to me.

At the close of race day we ambled by the front gates, finishing the last from the popcorn bag. There was Tipster. Damp shirt suckered to his back with racing sickness in his eyes; he had sweated buckets and smelled like he hadn't washed in days. His liquored grin pawed at Lily's skirt hem, wafting up behind the knee. Then he looked me in the eye. I gave him the nod. Tomorrow's fix was "on," and he smiled even more.

- CHAPTER 5 -

The dark hall swelled, overflowing with hay and wheelbarrows of manure—muck boots and shovels by stall doors. The sunlight winked in from the end of the stalls. A groom leading his charge from the cooling area passed, hooves clacking on the hard-packed, dirt floor.

Palms sweaty, slimming, I flattened against the stall boards, hiding with shallow breaths.

I read off the stall placards one by one. There was Nutty Buddy, my ruby: a burnt cinnamon three-year-old with a white sliver of a stripe, offset, from forehead to nose. A bucket of ice sat against the stall—he had been nursing an injury. I reached for the flat-bladed shovel leaning against the rail. Nutty Buddy sidestepped in uncertainty, edging away and moving to see me a bit more clearly.

Friend or foe.

I soothed, one hand outstretched, the other gripping the wooden handle harder. I cooed softer, intonating trust and caring, and continued the search for the right in all this—and coming up empty.

No way around. I saw green, and with two hands slammed that spade home into the front left pastern. Within the cries of pain, a choking inhalation, I swung once more, rocketing my soul outta sight.

Dropping the shovel, I walked urgently toward sunlight.

"Hey, stop that man!" I shouted, gripping the stall frame. A groom stepped into the hallway from the far end. The horse's eyes daggering into my heart, his chest heaving, body writhing.

God, what a noise.

"Hey, what's going on? Where's Marty?" the groom came running.

"I heard Nutty Buddy and saw a man come running out. I haven't seen Marty, but I'll go get him. Maybe he's walking Milky Way. You mind the horse?" Before a word of agreement, I was off toward the paddock. That was my ruse: Get the groom so focused on aiding the horse, that he never thought to detain me—until later. He'd have to carry that regret.

Pulling my cap lower, I slouched my right side and squinted into the sunlight.

I ducked into the darkness of the next tunnel and hurried. I had to get to the betting booth.

Then I spied Smitty, leaning over the paddock fencing. Track workers and grooms had already started to pile into the shed row. The draw was creating a distraction, as people called for the vet and others stood looking on.

“Smitty,” I insisted, pulling at his wrist, thrusting a wad of cash into his palm. Surprise showed immediately on his face.

“Take it. Bet Number Two in Race Four. No messing around—the twenty-dollar window!” I blurted out. “Number Two in Four,” I repeated sternly and there I left him in bewilderment. I pulled away in the tide.

Tears streaming down my face, I gasped for air through the track entrance, panicking to escape.

The Tipster was there, nodding in acknowledgement. I teetered to get away. I felt naked; this balding quack of a know-it-all knowing and smiling this sickness, eyes swimming, red nose, and he giving me the knowing. My soul, pitch black. Things had come to this? My life’s love—I’d killed it.

I would never again watch a race with joy in my heart.

- CHAPTER 6 -

So, to the flophouse I went, and there I waited ‘til the end of the races.

’Round 6p.m. I wandered over to Burwood Tap. Smitty, he would come to see everyone and recount the day. Eventually, he showed. Grabbing my pint, I sidestepped ‘round the stool, pushing him to the private, corner booth. “You want something from the bar?” I asked.

“Nah,” replied Smitty. “Listen here, I know you don’t know how you knew, but you did. I bet that horse to place and whaddya know? Two-to-one odds—and did I make a kitty!” Smitty beamed.

“What? Which horse you say?” I choked. Disbelief washed over me. Had he really put down on the wrong horse?

“I put it down on Fleet of Fancy, outta Merle Edwards’ barn. What a beauty too—such square confirmation, if I ever saw it.” Smitty took a swig from his flask.

The deal began to run circles in my brain. Besides Nutty Buddy, the Heiress of Candyland had two more running, you know, the ones named after chocolate bars. Again, not one of them was a superstar, but collectively, they ain’t too bad. Kinda even out the field and with one outta the way, it’d boost the odds of the others. I always got their names crossed, except my favorites, but on this day with my help, it was Milky Way, the Number Two horse.

“The Number Two: seven-to-two odds. That’d be, ah, nine bucks for a two-dollar bet,” I thought. Fleet of Fancy woulda been a gamble, but I figured Tipster had a bigger plan, or else he woulda told me to do in him instead.

“The Number Two horse. You bet the Number Two. That’s the one you bet, right?” I stammered. This isn’t happening. My temples were pressing the veins to burst.

“Nah, I placed the favorite,” Smitty said. “Bet the favorite, the Number Three. Same as you woulda done. Yeah, he didn’t win, but place isn’t bad.” Foam squiggled down from the lip of my beer glass, pooling on the table. “Milky Way took it. Sure, some investigation’ll go on. Kinda strange that Nutty Buddy went out—coincidental and tragic, it is.”

Defeated, I gulped down my beer, spilling half on myself, which I wiped away and slicked into my hair. My eyes stung, and I couldn’t hear but a single tone, ringing and ringing. Ominous, like the bell at the close of a betting window.

Smitty slugged from his flask. I couldn’t look at him for the want of punching him, a deep, visceral desire, but I couldn’t. It’s true: You gotta take betting into your own hands, holding surefooted in that \$20 line with sound resolve and a grip tighter than a winning ticket. You can’t send someone; you lose all control and keep all the responsibility of it.

I pushed through to the street, leaving Smitty to talk it up about that unfortunate colt on someone else’s time.

What had I done?

The next day was grim. I had tried losing myself deep in slumber, hibernating, creating a chamber of dull thud to escape any feeling. In the morning I skipped the usual and went to stand before those majestic, awe-inspiring gates. The Tipster waved me to his side.

“Listen, you fuckster. I said rig the race—nothing was said about no killings. Not kill the horse. I thought your brother-in-law was a pharmacy.”

“What, you pull the wrong guy outta the crowd? I got no clue about no pharmacist. Ah, I get it. You wanted the horse drugged—like I got access to that sort of stuff.”

“Whatever. It’s done. You better move, and now. Lose your name. Don’t forget the Missus; I’ve seen that blonde. They’ll take her out too.” He smiled.

They wouldn’t kill Lily. Why would they do that? Is a horse worth that much? May be they’d just hurt her a bit. Punch her in the ribs? Slash her face? Panic-stricken, I ran.

Lily.

I ran to the train station. The stairs grew steeper with each step. Reaching the platform, I dove for that sliding door. I could hear the door numatics squeeze as the car started forward, its jostling ramble down the track.

I’d reach the Loop in fifteen maybe, and catch her at work. “Pack a bag,” I’d tell her—for some time away. I’d pick her up at four. Borrow Lou’s car.

I scrambled down the stairs, taking a right at the building; the gargoyles above, laughing downspouts with a hollow whispering... “Sucker.”

A fourth of the cash I coulda won. Lillian away. Death on my hands. They’ll take their dough one knuckle at a time. I’ll tell ’em Santa will bring a new horsey this Christmas. Yeah, right—on my day wages? No. Repairing stoves at \$30 a week, I might be able to whittle one. One.

They’ll kill me to make it even.

- CHAPTER 7 -

I found my way into the Woolworth's ladies department and inquired after Lily to the woman behind the counter.

"No, Lillian's gone on a break," she replied, tidying her counter. "Try the food counter cross the street."

Entering the diner, I called, "Lily!" across the crowded room. I didn't care what people thought.

"Hey, Carl." She waved me over. "What a surprise! It's good to see you." A peck on the cheek between drags.

"Sorry, don't want to mess the makeup." She smiled.

"Yeah, of course. Listen, Kitten. How about you pack a bag? I'll get you this afternoon at two o'clock. We'll drive north to upper Michigan, Blaney Park. There's a lodge there. It's on the M-77, a mile north of U.S. 2. I know it's a ways, but it'll be grand. We'll get a cabin. Stay awhile. Please say 'Yes'."

"Geez, Carl. Breathe a little," she said, mulling it over. Taking one last, slow, sweet drag on that gummy red ringed cigarette paper. "OK." She looked at the wall, thinking and uncertainty showing on her profile. Turning back, she said, "OK. OK. Yes, I'll go." She punctuated it, seeming to gain confidence with each "OK." She continued, "I'll see if Betty will cover the counter at work. Funny how the cold season just hits ya' sometimes." She winked.

"OK then." I beamed. It'll all be fine. "I'll see ya." And gave her a good-bye kiss on the cheek.

- CHAPTER 08 -

As I pulled up in front of her apartment, I jumped out, squeezed Lily tight, and said, "Lillian, you are radiant. I got the car, gas, and gin. We are good to go." Slamming the lid down on the trunk, I started the car and away we went.

She was radiant. The sun was shining, and I couldn't remember a better time as we headed to the cabin. Night fell long before we rolled into the gravel drive. Lily didn't seem to mind, not too much.

The lodge had wood siding and a feeling of safety. We got a small, single room with a fireplace and stone chimney among the pines.

I unloaded the car, dropping the bags on the bed, springs creaking under the weight. She glowed. I glowed. Capture this in a Palmolive soap bubble ad.

Next morning I pressed my lips against hers. "Honey, I gotta go. I gotta get back, but I need you to stay here."

Scowling, she said, "I don't understand."

"I need you to stay here." I held her hand, squeezing slowly. "I need you to trust me. Stay 'til the end of the week. I'll come for you when it's safe."

“What? Safe? What’s going on? What have you done?” Lily raged.

“Just, please, I can’t explain.” I didn’t want to tell her that I was not the man she thought she was seeing—certainly not the one she met. I could see her mouth moving, but couldn’t hear a thing.

That horse wasn’t coming back. I had to keep her out of harm’s way. Put me in the clear and then it would all be OK. Kissing her, I left the room, turned the engine over, and headed down the gravel road to the highway.

- CHAPTER 9 -

Back in the city, moving was the first thing in mind; I laid low at a tenement hotel with immigrant workers from the yards. My heart was caged and pacing, waiting. I wanted to return to the track, but I knew that wouldn’t be wise. I didn’t know what to do. Who to talk to. What would make it better. It wasn’t like I killed a racehorse every day. Putting it off, I waited, fixing stoves in the early morning hours and drinking at the south-side Negro cabaret at night. Thinking of Lily, hoping she could hold out just a bit longer, but with no real motion to make it any earlier.

Wednesday I called her from a diner payphone. A luxury really, having a phone in the cabin, but they’d been trying to draw the tourists out that way.

“How’s the kitty? What’s his name? Cheerio?” I asked, clearing my voice to the side.

“Yeah. He’s been sitting there for hours, watching the wind catch the curtain. Doesn’t seem that wild,” she said. She told me that Cheerio made introductions on her first day there alone, scratching and mewing and carrying on like lost, hungry kittens do.

“And you? Been sitting there watching him watch the wind?” I was searching for conversation.

“Heh, yeah. Dunno. Bored, I guess. A little cabin fever. Miss you, I suppose.” She had been at the cabin a few days now in seclusion. Guess the time passes. I guessed that from her perspective, you paint your nails to pass the time, counting the number of coats it takes to start your fingernails bowing in. Then wipe it all off and start again.

Thirty-six, if you were wondering.

“Well, hold tight, Angel. Heat’ll pass soon.” -- a lousy affirmation from me to say the least.

“I’ve heard that one before, Carl. Tell me something new, like the sky will rain Coca-Cola and ladybugs will guide my way home. How about a reminder of why I’m here, and you’re there? Lie—make it a happy ending. So, what is it? It’s time to tell me. Everything.”

“I don’t know if I can. I want to, but...”

“Listen, I followed you, trusting you. What’s this? You’ve got reasons and wouldn’t do this foolishly. Right? You got reasons, right? But maybe you have done something foolish; something you can’t undo.” I could hear the rubberband winding, and imagined her starting to pace—more pacing, more smoking, more vexation. “I can’t just blindly stay here anymore. Talk now.” Her tone was turning angry.

“You’re right. I just. I... I can’t take it back, and I messed up. I don’t want anything to happen to you. I’m trying to protect you the best I know how. Just a little longer. Gimme more time to sort it out? I, I love you. I just gotta make sure I’m in the clear. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Yeah, sure.” A hollow external sound to convey a solid, internal conclusion, her only way of telling me I just wasn’t worth it. “Good-bye.”

- CHAPTER 10 -

Then, there was more waiting. I was slowly peeling the newsprint from the tenement walls; a week went by and the anti-climax of the ‘nothing’ that was happening.

Then Smitty came knocking on my door with paper in hand. “Listen. I think you’re off the hook. The autopsy revealed a crack in the semionle in the front right pastern, and the owner had an insurance policy that paid out twice as much as that horse woulda really been worth.”

“I hit ‘em in the left,” I said flatly. I was seething through my cigarette smoke and mashing the yellow out of my fried eggs. Yolk oozed over my toast.

“Yeah, well, like I’m trying to say. He was already on the way out with his right,” said Smitty, eyeing my eggs.

Sure, the horse had been pulling his weight, making enough to justify keeping him, but he was heading down the ladder. If he’d raced and won, some poor sucker coulda picked him up for \$6,500, but lost him in the next race.

“If he had raced at all, that bone coulda snapped, and it woulda been all over anyways. Maybe they’re thanking their lucky stars? No horse, but big money. Insured.” Smitty was trying to reassure me: there was no reason for them to bother with me now. That coulda been Tipster’s big plan all along. Make out good with the insurance and screw the race; it’s just a weird fluke that Fleet of Fancy lost.

Scaring me too was probably part of the plan; so I’d be outta the picture, and no questions asked by investigators.

What a dope, I am.

Smitty’s voice floated to the foreground. “Coulda taken a jockey down with him, but none of that happened. You saved a jockey, saved a potential buyer from financial straits, bailed out the current owner. I guess, just do a cleaner job on the horse next time—that’s all. Bludgeoning ain’t the way to go. You gonna finish those eggs?”

Suddenly, I lost my appetite, hearing that horse screamin’ in my mind. “Nah, you go ahead. I gotta get a move on. Go get Lily.”

Taking up my plate, Smitty sopped a fresh corner of toast into the yolk. No heart. Just a figures man, money and numbers is Smitty. Maybe that’s why he seemed to fall short at the window.

Bet on the runt with the crappy confirmation, the recovering cripple of a jockey, the one that will lose his shirt if that horse doesn’t fall first across the line. That’s where the determination to prove ‘em all wrong that’ll sway the goddess Fortuna to wink in your direction.

- CHAPTER 11 -

Within twenty minutes I was on the road to Blaney Park, working out what I'd say to Lily, fumbling over apologies. Which one? Which one would work best.

Rushing, I jumped into the car, started up the engine, peeled away from the curb, and raced towards the intersection. "She'll understand and forgive me," I whispered over and over, drumming on the steering wheel.

My mind preoccupied I didn't see the light change from amber to red or the lady with the carriage stepping from the curb on the right side of the street – not until it was nearly too late. Swerving left, I missed them, but found myself head on with a grocer's truck in the cross traffic. The sound was horrible: the metal crumpling in upon itself within my driving compartment, the glass shattering in my face, my hand, my hand. The truck had won, big time.

"Lily. Lily," I moaned, faintly aware of the blood gushing from my severed arm.

Immediately, a street cop responded, running into the scene. "Get an ambulance in here. Wrap that wrist, this guy's heading to the hospital!"

I came to in the hospital with Smitty hovering, like a nursemaid, pacing above me. "Where am I? How's Lily? She ok?" My husk of a voice whispered inside the left pocket of a moan.

Smitty fidgeted with the *Racing Form*. He's not keen on the emotional stuff, but delicately managed, "She's gone. She took the difference on the number of days on the cabin. Lodge attendant saw her climb in with the postman, hitched a ride to somewhere. She's gone." Smitty walked over to the window sill, watching a thrush light from the lawn. "Buddy, I don't know any other way to put this. So's you're left hand. It..it got pinned in the accident."

God, my chest felt tight, breathing shallow and fast. The tears just started forming at the corners of my eyes, pooling and slowly overflowing to my silent screaming, screaming within my mind.

She's gone. I knew she would be.

I didn't think I'd ever recover. Still haven't, a year later. It's all gone—romantic visions dead. All dead.

I crossed back over the street to Carl, still holding up the building and flipping through the *Racing Form*. "Carl. Come on, Carl. Snap out of it. What's done is done," he said. Sure, he fakes not paying attention when he is. He watched the whole thing pan out, even to the arching cigarette. "She ain't coming back." The El passed by over head. *Clackity clackity clackity*.

"Yeah, sure. I just.." I stammered, searching for a new cigarette.

"Here. Lemme get that for ya" Smitty struck a match. Urging, he said, "Come on. Let's go the track. Ain't nothing like the track. Come on."

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Author Biography

Anita Dime is the "pen-name" for Julia Huff, a self-published author. The first edition of "Horse Two" debuted in 2012, the first short story from this author. This noir short includes seven original linocuts by the author; depicting scenes of a guy's luck on and off the horse race track in the mid-1930s.

Listen to the first part of the "Horse Two" radio play at Coffee Contrails. Subscribe on iTunes.

Author blog: www.anitadime.com

Author email: anita.dime@flatcar6studios.com

Facebook: [anita.dime](https://www.facebook.com/anita.dime)

Twitter: [#AnitaDime](https://twitter.com/AnitaDime)

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