



## The Triple Crown

William Huhn

Once, toward the end of a Sunday dinner my dad had fixed for us, I looked at him, and he wasn't there. I had never seen him not there before. Till then he'd sat at the head of the dinner table as if he always had and always would. But somehow the topic of hair loss came up, and the moment he blamed his on the helmet he'd worn throughout the Second World War, as I said, he disappeared. He hadn't been killed, neither in that war, nor in the other war I'd heard him talk to Mom about, the Spanish Civil War, but I knew little else about his life, or lives, in the battlefield, not even whether he had a Purple Heart. Seizing on this possibility, I asked the soldier in Dad's chair if he had ever been wounded in action.

He continued peeling an unbroken coil of skin from his apple and started telling me about his post-Choate pre-Yale trip abroad. Rather than trail after his mother around the Louvre, he had trekked over the mountains bordering southwestern France and stolen into Spain after nightfall. Though he'd pored over everything in print in 1936 on Franco's clashes with the Loyalists, he was only a 17-year-old without military training, and his curiosity cost him a small hot fragment in the back, his sole war wound. The only commendation he earned came from his youngest child: I'd brag about his daring for years to come.

I forgot to ask him how he got home. Like the gash, the story itself seemed to self-cauterize; the same intrusion that opened it, closing it up. But I know he eventually made it back to Paris. After Hitler's defeat, he lived in the city for four years as chief editor of a trilingual magazine of the fine arts called "Occident."

With the carafe almost empty and a Kent perched on the lip of an ashtray, he might talk about his friendship with Henry Miller, whose work he published, or his poet-friend John Betjeman, or about the first time he met Tennessee Williams — on the Spanish Steps in Rome; but he would use intimate, laconic language that petered out much too soon for me to get a feeling for how significant these men were. He also revisited his postwar Paris by smearing Roquefort on a heel of bread and passing it to Mom with a translucent slice of apple; or by pouring a last taste of wine into her glass — except when she covered it with her hand.

I didn't understand the business and allure of literature and the literary life any more than I understood why someone would want cheese for desert, but I could tell that what he'd found at the heart of France was not to be again, not here anyway, not as long as he lived with his wife and children. When my dad took his parting shot of cognac, first raising it to the sky, I could tell he had another love, not a woman, but a life apart from us even if he couldn't live it.

His affection for horseracing came some years after he was back in the States. It's easy to see why the sport took with him. Every race promised a time, or returned him to a time, when great things could happen — and happen to him if he was only willing to take the risk. Disaster was the more likely outcome, but that notion remained happily foreign to him even while his own experiences bore out the truth of it. Like the grooms or the owners or the trainers — like anyone involved in thoroughbred racing — Dad was focused on the possibility of winning.

The drinker and chess master, Alexander Alekhine, was liable to tear apart his hotel suite if he lost a match. Since chess leaves nothing to chance, there was no room for Alekhine to forgive himself. My dad, on the other hand, could easily explain away his losses: the track was muddy; the horse hadn't been given a good post position. Maybe the course was too short for the horse to hit his stride.

But my dad also knew that horseracing entails risk factors that can't be measured or even imagined. Take *Humorist*, for example, an English thoroughbred foaled in 1918. He usually ran beautifully. Some days, though, a torpor seemed to grip him, or he would just plain stop, and no one knew why. They thought he was willful and pinned him with the reputation of a quitter. But when *Humorist* died suddenly, just a few hours after winning England's most prestigious Classic, the Derby, an autopsy showed that he'd been suffering from an advanced case of tuberculosis and had run the mile-and-a-half course, the last furlongs uphill, on just one degenerated lung.

My father had much respect for horses like *Humorist*, but he never would have bet on him. He was also smart enough not to put too much into any supposedly surefire system for handicapping thoroughbreds, systems based on everything from the day of the week or the positions of the planets to convoluted statistical analyses. A surprisingly large number of enthusiasts use systems that deal with nothing but long shots. When one of their choices finally comes home on top, they savor the memory for the rest of their days. Other horseracing fans might overemphasize the role a good jockey can play, important as that may be. Dad wasn't one of these dreamers, though his own calculations and hunches occasionally led to some unlikely plays and wind-falls.

I remember the Saturday he came back from Delaware Park, the closest track to our home, having successfully called a trifecta. He couldn't have been more than a few hundred dollars less strapped, but by the time he finger-stirred his Old Fashioned and poked up the coals for the steaks, you'd have thought debt and doing without were things of a bygone era. His high spirits seemed to have been unleashed on us for good. Had he had the patience to sit down right then and there and teach me his method for picking winners, I'd have been an eager student; but he soon got quiet, and the grill commanded most of his attention. He lovingly basted the meat and jiggled his ice and gazed out across the lawn, where the light of his lucky day dwindled.

Dad's system for handicapping was his own, and he claimed it outperformed conventional ones. I don't know how much he lost with it, but I'm sure he had some sense of its limitations. He knew what all good handicappers know: that you can't truly tell if your horse will prevail unless you see him just before the race — and that doesn't mean in the post-time parade. You have to see him in the paddock, maybe talk to the handlers. At Delaware Park my dad was occasionally given this VIP access through some of his business connections.

And I'm not sure how often he played the horses or even if he played them all that much. His jaunts to the track were two, three times a year, nothing unseemly on the surface. Sometimes he'd even bring one of us kids along. For years he worked in New York, where off-track betting was legal, but I don't remember seeing any off-track tickets around the house, not even when I snooped in his desk drawers. It's just possible he kept his betting and his losses in check. But then again, if he wasn't throwing money at thoroughbreds, I can't account for why he never seemed to have any.

Dad was a gold mine of ad-copy and ad-design at the firms he signed on with. He won awards for his work and pulled in considerable coin, but over time our beautiful three-story 200-year-old house fell into disrepair. Rundown "Cherry Cottage" made an unusual sight in the otherwise affluent town of Devon, Pennsylvania. Still, I was blessed to have grown up there. The trees scattered across our two and a half acres ranged from mulberries and Chinese corks — the "weed trees" — to vast oaks three times the height of our brick chimneys. But there was only one cherry tree, at least while we were living there, and I never understood how a big yellow house with a stone barn and only the single cherry came to be called "Cherry Cottage." But I took pride in the charm of the name.

And we usually had nice cars out front — used, sleek, sporty creatures, that died soon, or fixer-uppers that never got fixed up. They would sit for years sometimes, left for me to pretend-drive and rainwater to corrode. My dad didn't discuss these purchases beforehand with Mom. When he

drove up our gravel driveway in an old Alfa Romeo or Karmann Ghia or Porsche, we kids tore outside to greet him. Mom would emerge after us, slowly, her skepticism tucked behind a smile. The question of his judgment would be put aside if he could sell her on the great deal he'd gotten. Our delicate ecstasies would shatter at the first wind of an argument, but more often than not she was sold.

If he'd had the line of credit, he would have been bringing home thoroughbreds. His love of the animals was even richer than his fondness for betting on them. Above all he appreciated the beauty and valor of racehorses. He liked best to champion the ones whose talent and strength were not, he felt, reflected in the betting odds, and he relished the moment when such a horse brazened it out to victory. In these upsets I think he saw a chance that he'd come out on top of his own race. I wouldn't have bet against him. All he had to do was make good on what he had and he'd have been the favorite forever.

At a stalwart six one, Dad had innate stature. He could be a tower of charm if he was in a good mood, but we watched out for when he wasn't. His handsome face featured a thick mustache — that scratched when he kissed us — and a good noble nose and eyes full of intelligence. He had a rich booming voice that could be soothing and warm and make a pouting child laugh, but if raised it could thunder down and frighten the child to tears.

Ernest Hemingway's story "My Old Man" — about a boy who watches his father, a jockey, fall to his death when his horse stumbles — was among my old man's favorites. In Hemingway my dad recognized a kindred spirit. The author embodied all the things he liked — writing, drinking, Spain, and Paris. But Dad didn't have a dark undercurrent eating at him. He wouldn't have put a shotgun in his mouth. He chuckled too easily. His family anchored him too firmly. He felt connected, part of a heritage. Fifty years ago my grandmother may have been right to fret about her daughter's new husband, if just for his fascination with horseracing, but she couldn't have known how deeply the sport tied in with his sense of tradition.

Some may view the Kentucky Derby as an excuse for bluebloods to indulge their taste for hedonism, and they are not wrong. But the first Derby was run in 1875, and it has since become the longest-standing annual horseracing event in America. Derby Day, the first Saturday in May, had the feel of a minor holiday in our house. Around lunchtime, Dad would bury some fancy glasses in the ice bin. If he caught me observing him, he'd wink, as if we were in cahoots, and ply me with a grilled cheese sandwich. At five sharp, 30 minutes to post time, he'd reappear, turn on the TV, and ask which-ever kid was there if he or she had seen Mom. She was outside, we'd tell him. Presently Mom would come in with some fresh cut sprigs of mint for the mint juleps, the traditional drink of the Derby. Even we kids got some

minted virgin version of the drink — served up in the same frosted glasses the adults got.

Then Dad lent us each a dollar and wrote down the names of the racehorses on paper lots. Before pulling a name from a hat, we dropped our bill in Mom's wooden salad bowl. Since the field of horses inevitably outnumbered us — we were six — a few coin tosses decided who got to choose a second name. There were no first, second, or third places in our house; the winner laid claim to the whole pot. And no one had to pay Dad back the dollar.

During the seventies we were forced to comb the ashes for whatever diversions we could find. The great oil squeeze was on, and the holidays, from Derby Day on up, meant more to us as the decade took hold. Hobbled by job losses and mounting debt, Dad kept us afloat by jockeying for freelance assignments and working hard. I didn't blame him for the scarcity we endured. My old man just seemed to be having very bad luck.

But when a small cluster of polyps showed up on his vocal cords, I knew they were there because he smoked. He gave us the same smile he always did when confronted with a crisis of his own making, and he quit cigarettes cold for five or six months — until the polyps receded. His voice sounded normal for a while, despite the butts again filling the ashtrays. But then the huskiness began to creep back into it. At first he explained it away as a touch of laryngitis; then he wouldn't talk about it at all. Nor would he quit smoking again, though it was clear to all of us that the polyps were making a comeback. Incredibly, it would be more than two years before he quietly made another doctor's appointment.

Each spring, though, huskiness and all, he lifted his frosted glass and sang along with the televised crowd in Louisville a few bars of "My Old Kentucky Home," the Derby's anthem. His marriage needed re-evaluating. He was yelling at his kids for getting into trouble. We almost lost the house because of unpaid back taxes; he had to get his throat biopsied, and the death of one of his best friends gave him pause, but he still sang.

The seventies was an exciting decade for thoroughbred racing. In 1973, "Secretariat" — the "Horse of the Century" — became the first thoroughbred to win the Derby in under two minutes (1:59<sup>2</sup>/<sub>5</sub>). As he pounded down the stretch, my dad leaned forward in his chair and pounded the kitchen table so hard he nearly toppled his julep. "Now there's a horse!" he shouted. Secretariat's near-record Preakness and record Belmont wins gave him the Triple Crown. The only surprise was that in these three runs, his jockey, Ron Turcotte, gave his horse just two lashes — something my dad pointed out to me, also noting that such restraint was the mark of a superior jockey. He hated seeing a horse get "the life beat out of him."

In the '75 Derby a horse named Foolish Pleasure left Avatar behind in the stretch — to claim the Roses by a solid 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> lengths. Two months before,

Dad had had to have surgery to remove his cancerous larynx, surgery that left him wheezing through a permanent hole in his trachea, at the base of his neck. He was now mute. It took cancer to get him to finally give up his Kents. I may have still been in my single digits, but the irony of Foolish Pleasure's victory wasn't lost on me.

Dad rejected out of hand the electronic speaking devices and instead relearned to talk by pushing air up through his esophagus. For my part, I learned how to affect nonchalance, to seem not to notice his brutal disfigurement. It was a handicap really, but I never thought of calling it one until this moment, so deep ran my need to think of him as whole and undefeated. He perfected the art of esophageal speech, but the volume of his utterances never got much above that of a gravelly whisper, though sometimes when he was angry it still sounded to me like yelling.

Meanwhile, some other greats — Seattle Slew, the '77 Triple Crown winner, and Affirmed, the '78 winner (the only back-to-back Triple Crown champions) — fixed themselves in my memory. But I was in middle school now and not always around on the first Saturday in May. Ron Turcotte was thrown by a horse in '78 and paralyzed, but I don't remember hearing anything about it; and if you asked me about Pleasant Colony or Sunny's Halo or Spend a Buck, or any of the other Kentucky Derby champions of the eighties, I'd have to say I never heard of them, not least because none turned out to be Triple Crown material. But Dad saw every one of these noble animals panting in the winner's circle, draped in the necklace of roses, and at those moments he was free to indulge his imagination and wonder if this one, maybe this one had what it took to also bring off the Preakness and the Belmont.

After all, Sir Barton, the 1919 Triple Crown winner, had once champed in the same circle, his willful temperament flaring even then. And before becoming the 1930 Triple Crown winner, Gallant Fox had stood there with his one "wild eye," a whitened eye said to spook the horses he shot past. Then there was Whirlaway, the dangerous and psychotic horse who took the three races in '41. Whirlaway would run all over a racetrack. He could carry his jockey to the outside rail around the far turn — after walking out of the gate — but still be the first to cross the wire. Even more peculiar was Assault, the 1946 champion, a horse who had a malformed forehoof that gave him a seemingly club-footed gate and gallop. Few of the, thus far, 11 Triple Crown champions ran free of impediments or quirks.

The last time we watched the Derby together as a family was on the first Saturday in May of 1996, the year Grindstone prevailed. Weeks before, Dad's first full physical in two decades had turned up an aortal aneurysm, and he was just recovering from the operation he'd undergone to repair his artery. The thought of the upcoming Derby had seemed to quicken his recovery.

He also had what his pulmonologist called “chronic obstructive lung disease.” Since the natural moisturizing and filtering systems of the nose and mouth are bypassed in “neck breathers,” for 20 years his bronchioles had sustained damage beyond what had already been inflicted by 40-odd years of smoking, and he was now on almost round-the-clock oxygen. Nonetheless, with the aid of an aluminum cane he made it downstairs before post time, where a mint julep awaited him in a frosted glass.

Days after that race Dad lost his footing climbing the stairs and, in the fall, badly bruised his ribs. The injury kept him bedfast indefinitely, and his once powerful leg and arm muscles began to atrophy. His lungs made negotiating a mere trip to the bathroom something akin to being held under water. But as the months dragged on, so did he. Throughout the summer he spoke of needing to “fire up the tractor” — to cut the lawn; and when the first snowfall came, he needed to “chain up” the tractor tires, so he could plow the driveway.

Sometimes in the middle of the night the phone rang in my apartment, in New York City. The sound of labored breathing, terrible to hear at any hour, identified Dad long before he could get a word out, but I waited so as to grant him the dignity of identifying himself. The breathing was part of a distillation process that had left just a thin trace of the man, and that too would soon be gone. He just wanted to know what I’d been doing lately. Then he’d struggle to tell me that I was a “great kid” for “getting out there.” Or he’d ask my opinion of some new author he’d “heard about.”

The April morning my mom couldn’t wake him lives in her memory as the most frightful of her life. She shook him and slapped him, but he’d contracted pneumonia and his brain just wasn’t getting enough oxygen. By the time I reached his hospital bedside in Pennsylvania, his condition was grave, though he was at least opening his eyes by now. A hint of a smile even flickered over his lips when my sister scolded him: “We want you home by the Kentucky Derby!”

Overnight, he sank into a coma. Neither I nor anyone in our family had any blind allegiance to life. Dad himself had once told us he wouldn’t want to be kept undead by technology if his condition was hopeless. Nor did we maintain any illusions about his prospects. We did not “remember the Donerail!” — the 91-to-1 long shot who won the Derby in 1913, six years before Dad was born. But since we needed to say good-bye, Mom told his doctor to put him on a respirator for now, on the chance that he could be temporarily revived.

We visited Dad in Intensive Care, and I saw him lying there, strapped down, his arms jabbed and bruised by IV needles. The respirator hose was shoved down the hole in his trachea, a naso-gastric feeding tube forked through his nostrils; his chest was wired for the EKG, and a thumb clothes-pinned by a pulse-oxymeter. The charted arrhythmia of his heartbeat might

have been described using Chaos Theory. His blood-oxygen level in the 88-92 percent range had fallen below the normal 96 percent, but not to the point of alarm.

He came around. His eyes had a startled, dazed look, but he at once took in and accepted where he was. He immediately wanted juice and kept having to be told he wasn’t allowed any. Listening to us talk to him, he ached to speak, and sometimes he smiled, but he could barely mouth single words. After two days of this, the doctor told him that, if they took the respirator out, he might “fall asleep and never wake up.” But it wasn’t for the doctor to ask him if he actually wanted it removed. This errand fell to Mom. When she asked him, a succession of nods were as much as to say, “Get the goddam thing out of me!”

As if unpinning some rare and wondrous butterfly, the doctor and nurses also took out the IV needles. They unclipped and disentangled him from the thicket of tubes and wires, and freed up his arms. He was wheeled to a private room. There he found an appetite for the chicken broth, saltines, and cranberry juice that the hospital staff called “mild fare.” The color flowed back into his cheeks, and the pneumonia began to respond to the antibiotics.

On the first Saturday in May, Mom and my sister and I gathered around his hospital bed, below the TV. While Mom garnished our cranberry juices with sprigs of fresh mint, my sister put the names of the horses in a plastic cup. I lent Dad a dollar, and he put it in the “pot” — another cup — before picking his horse. He chose the number three ranked horse, Silver Charm, a gray Florida-bred bay colt who was said to have “the perfect style to win.”

But a horse named Pulpit grabbed the lead out of the gate. And he held it all the way around the first turn and still held it down the backstretch. Not until the far turn did Pulpit give ground, exhausted. Free House took over, but Silver Charm was coming up hard on the outside. You’d have thought Dad was watching his first Derby, not his last, as his picket-fence smile stretched wider. Silver Charm emerged on top, with Free House a tight second. But the favorite, Captain Bodget, was gaining momentum and closing, and down the stretch he pulled to the front. He looked like he had it until about the eighth pole. That’s when Silver Charm dug in with all the horse he was. Dad clean forgot he was dying when he saw his horse move up and snatch the Roses by a head.

We had to watch the second leg of the Triple Crown, the Preakness, without Dad. He’d been ambulanced to a “nursing and rehabilitation center” — in fact, a facility largely for terminal patients — and heavy doses of morphine kept him slumbering most of the time. His caregivers periodically squirted the narcotic syrup, the blue of raspberry Italian ice, between his gums, so it would be absorbed, and his nods grew faint, like the movements of stars. But when on a visit I told him that Silver Charm had come through at the

Preakness, winning the necklace of Black-Eyed Susans by a nose, he dimly beamed. His horse had a shot at the title that had been left unclaimed for 19 years now, since the great Affirmed ran the three races.

Before visiting Dad for the last time, I made sure no one else would be with us in the room. His eyes had been shut for a week now, save when my mother gently parted his lids to add moisturizing eye drops. His daily food intake had dwindled to just a few cc's of cranberry juice. And no son ever loved his father more than I. When I told him so, his parched lips trembled as if on the verge of speech. I told him that I knew he loved me, that he didn't have to say it. But I wished he could have.

"You've been an inspiration to me, Dad," I told him, but I couldn't go on because I started crying too hard. His heavy hand — that had set our plum puddings aflame and changed fuses and patted me on the head — rested limp in mine. But suddenly he lifted his other arm, as if he wanted to reach over and console his tearful son. It shook violently from the strain and dropped back to the sheet. Pressing my temple against the pale blue of his gown, I lobbed both his arms around my shoulders. His arrhythmic heartbeat sounded steady and strong to my untrained ear. Embracing his ribby torso, I told him to never forget how this felt.

Then it was time to let go. "I have to drive back to New York now, Dad," I said, and sat up. He loved cities — all cities, not just Paris, but Philadelphia, Rome, Madrid.... "Remember," I managed — but had to stop. I'd wanted to remind him of our family's Thanksgiving Day trips to Manhattan, but I also wanted to get through a few words without falling apart. So I waited for my strength to build, then I said some very important things, but I can't remember any of them now.

His hand felt a little cold so I put it under the covers before I stood up. "You used to always tell me you knew what I was made of." He wasn't responding at all anymore. "You showed a lot of faith in me, Dad. I'll always have that," I said. "I can take that with me now."

Last-ditch bouts of heaving and gasping had yet to disturb his delayed suffocation. His blood-oxygen level had yet to drop low enough to cause brain damage. These developments awaited me on my answering machine four nights later, when I returned from a friend's opening at a SoHo art gallery. Twice I'd sadly raised my glass to Dad's health that evening, and the toasts must have done some good: before the next sunrise his afflictions had run their course.

The day after the graveside service, when we interred Dad's ashes, Silver Charm ran in the Belmont. The Belmont is a quarter-mile longer than the Kentucky Derby and five-sixteenths longer than the Preakness. It's a race

that can tax even the most promising thoroughbred. Whispers that Silver Charm might lack the stamina to win it hadn't hurt his standing as the favorite, but another starter, Touch Gold, was also looking golden.

This horse hadn't been entered in the Derby, but he finished a respectable fourth in the Preakness, just a length and half behind Silver Charm, this after stumbling out of the gate for the most troubled run of his career. Experts considered his performance not so much lackluster as star-crossed. If Touch Gold had run a good Preakness and not sat out the Derby, he might have been the horse running for the Triple Crown that afternoon.

Touch Gold had a smooth trip in the Belmont. But when the horses plunged into that last, critical quarter mile, it was Silver Charm on top, leading his old friend Free House by a head and Touch Gold by half a length. Then the dynamics changed. With a scant seventy yards to go, Touch Gold found his strength and his resolve. He finally seemed to understand that this was his race, that he deserved it, and he gunned past Silver Charm and came in almost a length ahead of him.

My letdown lasted as long as it took for me to see that Touch Gold was just the sort of horse my dad liked to champion, the superior animal that only needed a good run to shine. His win did justice to the game of horseracing, and that's what Dad liked to see most. When I watched the horse enter the winner's circle, where the men draped a weave of seven-hundred white carnations over his back, the void of a world without Dad hit me as never before.

Over five years have passed since that race, five years without a Triple Crown winner. There hasn't been one in 24 years in all. But there's a goodness in this long night. And when another great thoroughbred does emerge, his victory will be the sweeter for all these years of loss.

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**William Huhn** was recognized in the back pages of *Best American Essays 2004* for this essay about his own father in our "Father's Issue 2003."