

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

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Around the Turn and Heading for Home (Chapter 3)

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WE HEAD NORTHEAST TOWARD THE BRIDGE, a double-decker with its shine intact. Jimmy is flying high as he nurses his tea and the idea he will fill his pocket even more at the track. But, as usual, I am skeptical and battling the notion I am along for the ride. Still, there are worse days for this, so I walk with a smile into the warm and steady wind.

The streets are full of all sorts of people—immigrants and the established, merchants and drudges, dreamers and distracted souls simply trying to get through the day. Some pause to trade greetings or do business, while others trudge on with their heads down as if off to complete some disagreeable task. Those not walking employ various modes of transportation such as horses, bicycles, and trolleys, which clatter so they remind me of girls in sixth class.

Their racket is far from the end of it. All sorts of machines are running at full bore in spite of the holiday. They lend a haze to the air and a stubborn odor that reminds me of burnt fuel, hot metal, rotting food, piss, and manure. It makes for an annoyance, like a dull headache one might miss if it was not there.

However, none of this slows Jimmy. He pulls ahead of me and tugs his hat so the brim shields his eyes. He hums one of his Irish-hero songs and occasionally nods at pretty girls, especially the curvy ones with innocent eyes.

We happen upon his favorite of these two thirds of the way to the bridge. She is a brunette with olive skin and features like a sculpture, especially her triangle nose and shallow dimples. Along with her another child—a pudgy boy I take for her brother—is selling bread from a wagon. The loaves are all shapes and sizes, some with seeds scattered across their crusted tops. They're wrapped in paper, and despite the fact we ate just over an hour ago, their aroma is nearly too much to resist. Besides, we have a trek ahead of us and did not account for how we are going to sate ourselves at the track.

Jimmy must be thinking the same way because, without a word to me, he stops and pulls the wad from his pocket, peeling off a bill for the boy. The lad tries his best to keep his wide eyes beneath his hat. He nods toward the wagon and mutters—in nearly passable English—"Which one?"

"Round, with seeds." My brother tries to hide the fact he cares more about the girl than the bread. "Quite a nice day to make some sales, is it not?" At first, the question is posed to no one in particular. But, as his words arc, he turns to her and gives his best Galway grin.

She returns a smile but says nothing.

The brother's face is deadpan. "Her English is not so good." He hands Jimmy several coins.

"I see. Well, can you ask her if she's ready for the big fireworks show?"

"No." The boy turns to the wagon and arranges the bread by size.

"She's not."

Jimmy raises his cap and tries to hide his agitation. "Why in the hell won't you ask her?"

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Meanwhile, the girl scans our faces, turns to shoo away some pigeons, and turns back to give me a smile.

Her brother throws back his shoulders and wrings his hands. "Because I know she's seen enough of rockets!"

"Easy, little man." Jimmy pauses to look at his feet. "The war?"

The boy sets his hands on the edge of the wagon and suddenly looks much older. "Belgrade. Our parents were killed in the shelling. We ran to Greece with my mother's sister." "I'm sorry," Jimmy says. "So you came here with your aunt?"

"No. She died in Greece— from coughing."

"Tuberculosis?" For some reason I think he needs to be more spot-on about this. The boy shrugs.

Jimmy shoots me a sideways glance. "So, who bakes?"

"She bakes. I sell. Now enough of your questions."

My brother realizes he's getting nowhere fast, so he turns to head off. But, after two steps, he turns toward the girl, pulls his hat across his chest, and bows deeply. "My lady."

Her brother says nothing and spits on the ground.

I set the pace for the next several blocks while Jimmy kicks at the stones on the street. It's getting warmer, and the sweat is soaking through his grey shirt. There are only a few clouds scattered in the sky.

The windows of most of the walkups are open. Here and there heads poke out from between the narrow frames, and shouts—in what seem like a thousand languages—echo off the unforgiving concrete. Amid the bustle, boys play baseball, shouting they are Wally Pipp whenever they hit a long one.

As we near 54th Street, a fancy motorcar with no roof kicks up so much dust I need to stop and sit on a stoop for a cough. This somehow lifts the spirits of Jimmy who declares it's the latest from Henry Ford.

"I could care less if it's from Henry VIII!" Between sputters I smack a film of grime off my shirt and wipe my mouth. "The driver's a maniac."

Jimmy snorts. "The trouble is you lack the proper constitution. Such things don't bother a soldier."

"Really?" I stand and straighten my rumpled clothes. "Get off."

We barely speak between there and 59th Street, where we find a lengthy line for the trolley as well as the El. I fear heights, so we stick to our plan and head for the tracks on the lower level.

When we get there, we notice a backup of cars, including the topless Ford, so I flick the rods at the driver as we head off to pay our fare. Jimmy gets quite a kick out of this. I suppose he thinks I'll make a decent rebel yet.

I purchase our tickets and join my brother on the platform. It's not long before the wire starts to hum and sway. We turn to the west and watch the car rattling our way. I pick at my shirt, giving a little room to my skin, and my brother shoves his hands deep in his pockets so thieves have no room to work.

I keep my head down while on the bridge. But, once we're over, the

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ride across the Long Island is pleasant enough. The mobbing clears out a bit, and I can only imagine quite a few chaps from Hell's Kitchen giving more than a hair to live here.

As we clack along, Jimmy does the same in regards to the racetrack. "We need to look for horses with endurance. Not only is it hot as Hades, this track is as long as they come."

Still miffed by his constitution comment, I am in no mood to have my window watching interrupted. "You haven't the time to judge a horse's endurance," I say. "Besides, won't they be in the paddocks?"

My brother is undeterred by my temperament. "There are ways to tell: The chest and breast, the hindquarters and loins. I know horses."

"Hmm ... sounds as if you judge them like women."

He looks at me sideways and rolls his eyes. But I'm not about to let it go. "She liked me more you know."

He tilts his head. "What in the hell? Who?"

"The girl at the bread cart. She looked me over top to bottom, and not a second glance for you."

"Now, Andy." He takes off his hat and brushes his hair.

"You're just sore her little bulldog fought you off." My voice climbs higher, and I lean forward in my seat.

"He was a boy." Jimmy seems taken back by my attack. "I may be an ass, but I'm not a monster. The elf's seen enough. In fact, I respect ..."

"I think you were scared, soldier."

"Ah, go to hell!"

"Same to you." I look out the window. The houses are growing smarter by the mile.

Jimmy continues with his blathering about Mr. Belmont's park, perhaps as a way to get even. By the time we get there, I know it's the home to a rather crucial stakes race, ran just a few weeks before. They run the races English style—in the manner time moves—and the track is quite long, a mile and a half, which makes it a test for most horses.

Belmont's father launched the stakes and left him a stud farm he parlayed into a thriving business. Folks came from far and wide both to admire his horses and challenge them. He built the park on the eastern edge of the city a few years earlier to expand his interest and those of horse enthusiasts like himself.

These include gamblers such as Jimmy who flock to the village—the smattering of barns, bunk houses, and proving grounds—arising from the track. They carry just enough cash to keep their heads out of the clouds as they mill among the stable staff, trainers, and occasional jockey studying the animals and listening for any tidbit of intelligence they can use to their advantage.

Sometimes they share information. But they generally compare first-hand observations against the latest from the Daily Racing Form.

My brother rolls his copy and tucks it in the pocket opposite his poker winnings as he ambles from stall to stall. He coaxes one animal close enough to check its teeth, just working his fingers along the limp gums when a crusted voice croaks, "Hands off!"

Jimmy snaps to as I stumble backwards into a swinging gate secured precariously by an iron chain and narrowly avoid a bath in horse shit.

"I don't allow for anyone meddling with my horses." The voice belongs to a tall, square-shouldered man with a thick shock of blonde

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hair at odds with a red triangle of a beard. "How do I know you're not a saboteur?"

"I'm just ..." Jimmy tries in vain to straighten his hat.

"Just like hell!" The man is carrying a bridle and bucket. "For all I know that bastard McAllistair sent you."

"Who?"

"Don't play dull with me. It would be just like him to send a mick like you to poison my horse."

Jimmy takes a breath and ignores the insult. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I don't know your Mister McAllistair."

The man hangs the tack from a nail on the wall and studies us both in silence.

My brother continues. "I was taking a gander to see if he was stout enough for the distance." He pulls the racing form from his pocket in the hope it gives him some credibility.

"Comenius is more than up to the distance." The man hoists the bucket into the stall, and the horse—a bay stallion with a white blaze—begins to feed. "He's won twice this meeting already."

Jimmy feels the man softening. "That's impressive. I give you my word; I'm just your run-of-the-mill chancer." He tucks the form under his left arm and extends his right. "The name's Jimmy O'Brien—pure mick, guilty as charged."

"Manheim—American, and I'll kill the man who says different." He gives my brother a second to consider his words then shakes his hand. "And I still prefer you stay a hand's length away from Comenius."

"Understood. The question is whether I'm moving any closer to placing a wager."

"That's none of my business, O'Brien." He finds another nail from which to hang the bucket and turns back for the bridle. "I think guesswork is a foolish way to spend your money."

"You'd rather bust your balls and your back for an honest wage?"

Manheim nods and allows himself a smile. "Something like that, but I have a shirt on my back at the end of the day." He nuzzles the horse behind the ears. "But to each his own."

"I suppose. But don't more bets make more money for owners such as you?"

Manheim laughs at this. "You think I own him? O'Brien, we only see owners in the paddocks on the cooler days in hell and certainly not on the Fourth of July."

"So what's all this noise about your horse?"

"He is. I'm Comenius' trainer. I'm with him a fair bit more than that blower in the clubhouse." He scratches the horse's jaw line, and when the animal responds by moving closer, slips on the bridle. He follows this with a kiss on the snout. "As you see, he likes me better too."

Jimmy chuckles. "I'm certain. Well, we'll be on our way. Good luck."

Manheim nods. He does not speak until we're a few steps away. "If forced to play odds, I would bet on Comenius. He's run well this week. He's strong and rested."

My brother looks over his shoulder. "Not the sort to wilt?"

"O'Brien, I don't raise flowers."

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Truth be told, Jimmy's no novice where horses are concerned. Back in Galway, he spent holidays working as a groomer for Mr. Kavanaugh who raised draft horses and boarded other odds and ends on a spread east of the city. The chores—hauling water and mucking stalls—led to much muttering at the time. But they did make my brother aware of the ways of horses, their basic care and temperament.

As to how that relates to making wagers I'm unsure. However, my brother's unaware of the meaning of hesitation. He takes off for the window, humming, with his thumbs just slipped in his pockets. I am a few yards off the pace trying to make sense of the noises, smells, and arresting colours draped over the mounts ahead of race time.

We reach the counter quickly, only to find a long line winding along the concourse. Jimmy passes the time with toe tapping and jabbering. I listen with just one ear and continue to size up our surroundings. The gamblers are a particular sort though I cannot put my finger on it. They simply have the stench of desperation.

We reach the agent and Jimmy places a bet on Comenius for the fourth race. He receives a ticket in return that explains there is a payoff should our horse win, place, or show. My brother checks it twice, folds it to give it a bit more weight, and drops it in the pocket of his shirt. Horses are moving toward the gate, and neither of us wants to miss the show.

The spectacle is best taken in from the grandstands. I feel worlds colliding and imagine this is democracy, not a level plain but a set of tiers stacked under one roof. The post strikes me as martial. If only all beasts could be so easily tamed with a bit.

The music stops and the crowd cheers. Jimmy rubs his palms on his knees. Race one goes to a filly in orange and black silks. She pulls ahead on the last turn and takes it by two lengths.

The second run is closer. A grey gelding forces its way to the front along the rail and wins by two lengths.

I warm to the action by the third race, and Jimmy gives me a knowing smile. He points out a chestnut stallion with a star. "There's a bounce to the gait of that one." I agree he stands out from the field. His ears are perked and twitching, and he walks as if he has a mind to break from the pack. I'm awed by his blue and cream silks, which shimmer when caught in the right light.

He starts well but gets pushed back by traffic. By the second turn, I stand with Jimmy. Our favorite finds a line to the outside. We scream, urging him to make for the rail, but he's blocked. "He's going to have to go farther harder," Jimmy calls over the racket. I nod and wrap my arm around his back.

The stallion gains ground on the backstretch. He's running third in a pack thinned to six horses. The gap closes to less than a length on the final turn. Our horse edges next to the leader in a stride-for-stride pairing on the homestretch. We're joined by several thousand others on our feet, and I can feel the grandstands sway.

I bounce on the balls of my feet as pounding hooves stir the dust. My fists are balled. The finish line is two hundred feet away, sixty, ten ... with a fissure measured in bobbing heads. And our stallion's pumps forward as his challenger's retreats. He wins!

Jimmy seizes my head and locks it between his arm and stomach. I'm laughing too hard to protest as he rakes his knuckles across my skull. "I

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told you! Now, here's one for the money."

The jostling does nothing to damper my excitement. If Comenius is the horse Jimmy and Manheim believe, we can go home with a significantly fuller pocket. And, while this may make it hard to fit my brother's head through the door, I'll take that trouble for rent money.

The big bay stallion is the first led from the paddock to the gate. He looks remarkable in silks of maroon and grey that make him appear larger than when we saw him in the barn. The sunlight concentrates on his coat, and I look twice to be sure he's not on fire.

Comenius stands upright, as if his jockey is no weight at all, with nary a hint of wasted motion in his step. It is a bearing that raises expectations, with flared nostrils I am sure are gathering the air for a ferocious burst of energy.

Jimmy has managed to lend a neighbor's field glasses for a look that confirms my observations. He tells me this with a nod. And this confidence does not waiver when he sees our horse fifth from the rail. "That's fine. I'd rather have him there than in the mid where he can get caught up in the traffic. He's plenty strong for that spot."

"I trust you, at least in this matter."

My brother smirks. "Well, that's something."

The starters' line drops. Our horse has neither a first-rate nor feeble start. Rather, he's running with the pack, about two lengths behind an undersized filly on the post.

He holds steady through turn one with vigor to spare. Meanwhile, the leader fades as she's crowded. Seeing Comenius is clear of the clutter, Jimmy windmills his arms and shouts, "Go! Go! Go!"

As the field hits the backstretch, it is impossible to discern a leader. I open my mouth to cheer and realize my voice is gone.

Heading into turn two, the filly gets cut off by two geldings. The pack falls slack with Comenius looming on the outside. His jockey finds the apex of the curve, and they push past the geldings. It is clear which horse is strongest.

Jimmy teeters on the edge of sanity as they hit the homestretch. He claps me on the back so hard I fear losing my lunch. He breaks into a jig as Comenius proceeds to make a formality of things. In the end, he wins by four lengths.

I scan the track where the jockey is putting the winner through his paces to let him cool. I swear I catch a glimpse of Manheim smiling, his tresses tossed by the warm but considerable wind.

By the time I turn back to my brother, he's puffing a cigar with a stranger and explaining how the outcome was never in doubt. As he says this, he deftly pulls the sweat-stained ticket from his pocket and puts it in his trousers to dry.

He catches my eye and smiles so wide, if I didn't know better, I'd swear they had freed Ireland.