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Sheila Macavoy

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SHEILA MACAVOY

Daily Double

At four a.m. I sit up in bed, my back spliced stiff at the waist where they put the titanium rods in my spine. In the room, the dark is dense as black bean soup and my slippers scoot away as I reach with a toe. The pain wakes up, too.

I will sleep no more this night. I pop a happy pill and sit at the tin table in the kitchen alcove to wait for morning. Beyond the trees in back, the San Gabriel Mountains rise deep blue against the October sky. No sign of mist. Not too long from now, who knows? But today, I go to Santa Anita.

A calendar is tacked to the wall and pink light creeps over a photo of a mud raked jockey jammed upright in the irons. The jock is on the back of a huge bay colt and the colt's ears are pricked. He is all business. My skin itches with anticipation; the Oak Tree Meet will open today.

I wrap a maroon paisley turban around my head to cover the dry tufts of my remaining hair and put on a bit of lipstick. In the months since the surgery, I have not been to the track and I am cranked up for this. I light a cigarette and inhale into my remaining lung. Opening the racing form to the day's meet, I start pencil notations in the margin.

There is a horse in the Second, Rasputin, a four year old colt with goofy numbers. His speed rating is abysmal, but he is the great grandson of Mister Prospector and the last rating can be looked on as a bounce. His dam is a distant cousin to Northern Dancer. I have a feeling about this one. The morning line of fifteen to one holds promise. Maybe Rasputin will sneak in like a second story man.

I am ready to drive the car on my own today and will not need to take the pathetic, old timers' bus to the handicapped parking space in front of the entrance. I will walk from my own wheels to the ivy covered gates. Maybe even through the tunnel to the infield.

The soft boiled egg is too soft and I soak it up with toast that is over done. The coffee tastes like fried mud. You wouldn't say I am a great cook.

“See that?” The woman holds out a huge, pale arm punctuated with six bullet sized scabs, grouped in three sets, each evenly spaced about three inches apart. “Python bites.”

“No,” I say.

“Swear to God. Big bastard got out of a neighbor’s cage.”

“Really?” Somehow, this wasn’t what I knew of pythons. “I thought they squeezed their prey to death.”

“They do. But after that, they hold on to the victim with their fangs. So they can swallow the body. Head first.”

I imagine this fat lady, maneuvered into position by a python, all two hundred and forty pounds of her. “Did he try it on you?”

“You can bet he was thinkin’ about it.”

“Lucky,” I say. That word, a spark. I light up again, offer my fat friend a smoke, which the woman takes. “What have you got in the Second?”

“JimJams. Eddie D. is hot.”

I check the Form next to JimJams. “View from the Forum,” it says.

“Thanks.” Another screwball. I move away, into the hall below the grandstand, into the open space where the serious people congregate to study their race cards. On the far wall, the bettors’ windows are opened, but too early for much business. Only one cocksure bettor, probably with a sister from Tupelo Springs who reads Tarot cards, is lounging by the window.

Under the stairway to the top deck I find a bench. It is snug against a wall and has been freshly painted a cream colored enamel, cleaned up for the Fall meet. Positioned just outside the entrances to the Rest Rooms, it is not favored by the squeamish. On a toasty day, which this promises to be, the disinfectant barely overpowers the pee stink.

In the bottom of my big black purse, I have brought along a roll of masking tape. I fasten a square of stock market results torn from the *LA Times* to the left end, the good luck end, of the bench, reserving enough room for my bony rump. The radiation has wasted all the big muscles in my body, my butt as well as my thighs and arms. Sometimes, without a base to plant my fanny, I feel like I will topple off a seat like an upended pear.

Now the serious work begins.

In the First, ten fillies are on the card. Two year olds. They are fun to watch with their dainty hooves and baby teeth. Spooked and crazy, they toss their heads and train their terrified eyes on the grooms. Easy to be sucked in by their beauty. They are the Spice Girls of the horse world and, without history, they are hard to handicap.

I will need a go at the walking ring to have a look.

"Anyone got this end, lady?"

The voice is rough, assertive. I look up and find a pair of scarecrows, the tall and younger one supporting an old man under the arm. The old guy is mopping his bloody forehead with a torn up T-shirt. Half his face is covered, but I see that he has a receding hairline and a coarse stubble of beard liberally mixed with white.

"My friend here could use a seat," says the younger man, the Good Samaritan.

"What happened?" I ask. "He get mugged?" I thought of that monster parking lot. "Need a cop?"

"No, no, lady. Nothing like that." The bloody man eases himself on to the bench and sighs.

"My friend here got rear ended," says the younger man.

"You took some kinda whack," I say to the bloodied face next to me.

"Happened on the freeway off ramp. Sepulveda exit," says the Good Samaritan. "Sommabitch plowed right into him. Totaled."

"He saw the whole fuckin' thing," says the injured patron. "Pardon my French."

"So you drove here after the crash?" I say.

The injured man shifts his feet and unzips his jumper. He is wearing a lot of clothes for a hot day. Probably his entire wardrobe.

"I ain't seein' double or anything," he says.

Just what I need. My kinda guy.

"Well," says the Good Samaritan, backing away. "You're in good hands, friend. You have my phone if you need a witness." This Good Samaritan has resigned. Within seconds, he disappears into the crowd.

The injured man groans and takes the bloody rag from his forehead, examining the bright red. The rag itself is none too clean.

“Jesus,” I say. There is a purple welt on the nob of his skull. The man’s left eye is swollen shut and there is a three inch gaping wound slashing through the eyebrow. “Did the glass break?” I ask.

“You bet. Pieces all over. In my mouth, even.”

“I’ll say it once. You should go to a doctor.”

“Miss the Double if I did.”

To win the Daily Double, you pick the number one finisher in the first two races—and place the bet before the bell for Race One. It’s a silly bet, really. The old timer looks at me through one rheumy lid, his face blotches of red and purple. He pulls out his own racing sheet, a well used, beat up copy of the weekly digest provided by off track betting parlors. Old timer. Who am I kidding? He beats me by five years, the most.

“Any scratches?” he asks.

This makes as much sense as anything else happening today.

My new friend and I, Paulie is his name, read our numbers in silence. Three teenagers, young men with baggy jeans and strategically untied Nikes, stand a few feet away, arguing over the exact method of estimating speed ratings with a bettor’s calculator.

“I hate those things,” I say to Paulie.

“Me too. Never win a dime punching buttons.”

“I like the walk ring.”

Then, from nowhere, “Aghhhh...” says Paulie. He groans and leans back against the wall behind us, adjusting the T-shirt to a less bloody spot. He is even more colorless than when he first came up to the bench, his skin grey around his nose and chin. “I like the ring, too. But I ain’t makin’ it today. No fu..., no friggin’ way.”

He leans forward over his papers and moans. A drop of blood falls on the form.

“I mean it, friend. You need medical attention. Might have an insides problem. Spleen or kidney rupture.”

“Lady,” he says, pretty loud for a wounded man. “Back the fuck off.”

This time, he doesn’t apologize for his language. As if he needs to. Well, I guess I get it now. Quit smoking, Mom. Eat more green leafy vegetables, Mom. Get more rest, Mom. The litany.

“Deal,” I say. “How about if I go up to the ring, have a look, and report back?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Wheezing like a faulty pump, when I reach the front entrance, I take a seat under a fan palm and collect. The entrance is dangerous if you have made up your mind, but I am still looking for inspiration in the first race. As the fans stream in, I hear every filly, but two, mentioned as sure things. One gets more chatter than I expected, Desiree, but there is nothing major in that. She is the favorite at four to one. The unnoticed are Fantasy and Saucy Girl.

The trip over to the walking ring is easier, no inclines and a few rails to lean on. I find a spot near the far side where the horses come in from the barns. I love this part, the eyeball of the jocks, their amazing teeny butts, their old man’s faces.

The fillies start in, a strapping roan first, then the rest—bays, browns, chestnuts—some with socks, some with braided manes. Desiree goes by, too fat I think. Her jock is the Cuban hot shot Pedro Vaienza.

“Whack ’er, Petey,” someone yells.

“Va-va-voom.”

“Viva Castro!” This from an illegal with dented cowboy hat.

“Castro’s a dickhead,” shouts a heavily rouged woman in silver Spandex.

“Bomba!” screams the cowboy.

The fans are shoving and jiggling now, hormones racing. A freaked out filly bucks hard at the crowd. It’s Desiree on her third pass. She has white foam between her legs and is streaked with wet on her flanks.

There is one, a big redhead, with a tail clipped square, Irish style. The whites of her eyes show as she frets around the ring. She does not like this at all. I check her number and my card. Number five, out of the three hole. Odd numbers are lucky. It’s Saucy Girl at eight to one. I check the electric board on the back wall of the grandstand. She has been bet down to six to one and I can see why. She will either go like hell from nervousness or fear, or both, and she is the great-granddaughter of Niarchos.

But most of all, she is a knockout, in perfect condition, great bronzy coat, no fat, powerful rump. Her trainer isn’t much, but the farm is good—County Kildare backed by Oman.

In maiden races, I only worry about appearance and the jock. Saucy Girl has Gordo—Gordo the ancient. If he’s sober, and makes

the weight, he's a genius with the young ones. I might bet on others, but I know at once. Saucy Girl will be my numero uno. It's not science, but it works.

I go back, slower than I like. After a pause in the front archway to become accustomed to the darkness inside, I shuffle forward through the crowds to find Paulie and agree on a strategy. This pause always reminds me of going to the movies—the expectation, the suspension of time. Ahead, the cooler dark beneath the grandstand rackets with shouts, back slapping, the laughing of tense punters. You can smell the cooking meat and the fries bubbling in rancid oil.

To my left is a mountain of iced donuts shrieking sugar, fat, vanilla. My kids will kill me. I buy two, one chocolate, one pink-iced old fashioned. Paulie can have his pick.

Somehow, I know we will do today as a team. Why is that? Paulie is the kind of guy I would avoid like a free ticket to the Opera. Our deal is unspoken, it is just there. We will pool our cash and make the most of this day.

The Oak Tree is run in the dry season. I remember one torrid opening day a few seasons back, I sat in the stands and watched across the track as the San Gabriel mountains smoldered with sparks drifting in from a wild fire in the outer valley. Then, like on a movie set, the hills exploded into flames. Fire trucks screamed along the ridge lines and bright orange sheets of fire roared several stories high, ripped through the parched trees of late summer.

Bettors at Santa Anita Park continued to study their racing forms as the hills blazed; they chatted in small groups or talked to themselves. I sat alone that day, a horse fan, a believer. I never thought of leaving.

Now, I find Paulie, if anything, in worse shape than he was before. He has collapsed into a pile of dirty laundry and the greyish color has spread to his lips and around his eyes. He is like the patients you see parked in hospital beds outside the ICU, the pale ones, the ones beyond help.

I sit down near him on my square of stock reports and reach for his hand.

“It's me, Paulie.”

“Umm.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

He tries to straighten up, fumbles with his form and drops his short pencil to the concrete floor.

“I can’t...”

“Don’t worry, champ. Here. Have some food.”

Paulie stares down at the two donuts lying across my lap, resting on the white paper sack. They look like molded plastic food in a deli window.

“I want Cherry Vanilla in the first.”

“Cherry Vanilla? You’re crazy. She has hocks on her like a damn pig.”

“Cherry Vanilla. The four horse to win.” His voice is a dim whisper. “Even number’s good. Besides, I had a tip.”

“It’s your funeral,” I say, and wish I hadn’t. “I have Saucy Girl, number five. She looks spectacular.”

Paulie squints to see the TV screen nearby as the horses bounce past the stands in the post parade.

“Too thin,” says Paulie.

“Well, I’ve decided. Pick a donut.”

“Which one you want?”

“You first. You’re the sickest.”

Paulie reaches for the pink-iced, then selects the chocolate. Damn.

He takes a bite and half turns.

“You sick?” he says. Chocolate is on his upper lip, mashed into the short whiskers.

“In a manner of speaking. Anything else for the bets?”

“How about we box three and five?” he says.

A box bet is a sucker bet, two horses in either order, say, Saucy Girl #1 over Cherry Vanilla at #2, or the other way around. It’s for punters who can’t make up their minds, the ROI is so chintz. Not sane to box two fillies chosen from completely different systems. Paulie looks up with effort, his eyes just open enough to catch the expression on my face.

“It’s only money,” he says, and smiles revealing widely spaced yellow teeth stuck with donut crumbs. Now I know the extent of his injury.

"How much?" I say without argument.

"Hundred bucks. Fifty each."

"Okay." I will lose this money, but Paulie is in such a state, I feel it is the least I can do. Like visiting the sick, one of the Cardinal virtues. "What about the Double?"

"I'll go for a tenner. Cherry Vanilla with..." He is struggling with a thought. "You pick."

Oh, Christ.

"I was thinking Rasputin. I've seen him before. He's black as sin with one white sock."

My trip to the betting windows takes time and I am huffing pretty hard when I get up to the teller.

"What'll it be, good lookin'?"

"Mister, you better see your eye man." I'm just not in the mood for that. I get out my sheet and read off the bets. "Ten dollar Double, number four and number seven. Hundred big ones boxed on number four and number five. And twenty on the Double, number five and number seven."

I don't feel good. There is time to bet on the second if I want a look at Rasputin, but I'm not sure I have another trip to the walking ring in me.

"Give me \$60 across on Rasputin in Race Two."

"Numbers only, lady." Now he's giving me a hard time.

"Sixty to Win, Place, or Show on number seven in the Second Race. That okay?"

"Review your bets."

Then, I commit the bettor's equal of sacrilege. On the line coming up to the window, I have heard a tout blab about an entry in the second, "a sure thing." The colt is Paul's Reward. I hear his last trip was a fluke, a seventh place rout on a quick track; he is ready for a race true to form. What's more, he's wearing blinkers this time. He's number four in the second.

"Second thought, give me a ten dollar Exacta, number seven over number four." This means I have to take the second race in the one, two order, Rasputin on top of Paul's Reward, to win the Exacta. If I'm on a limb, I might as well go out on a long one.

The teller pushes the tickets across and I check to be sure I haven't been stiffed. Sometimes they sneak in a bad entry and palm

it off. Tellers must account for every punch on the machine. Keeps them honest. It's a political appointment, these parimutuel jobs. You actually have to know somebody.

I make it through the crowd and find Paulie surrounded by standees eyeing my seat.

"I had to fend off a couple of punks," says Paulie. He seems more chipper, more into it. Race One gets off right on the button and we watch from our bench under the stairway, the announcer's British accented voice a nasal whine. The fans have cleared out to the rail and we have a clean shot to the TV monitor a few yards away.

As expected, Cherry Vanilla gets off early and cruises in to the rail.

"Oh, Mama," says Paulie.

Saucy Girl is in the pack, but not looking very saucy. And damn, Vaienza has that nag, Desiree, sitting in third. Down the back stretch, they just seem stuck in place.

"Come to Pappa, dear," says Paulie, as Cherry Vanilla begins to gently stall. Her tail flips up once when her jock taps her shoulder and I know she won't be in it. Paulie has seen it too. "Muthafuckin' god damn lousy dumbbell nag," he moans.

Meanwhile, that dog face, Desiree, begins to take off ahead of my beauty, Saucy Girl. Gordo looks like he's dozing on my pony's shoulder.

"Wake up, Gordo, you worthless piece of shit!" I scream. Paulie jumps on the bench, startled.

I know it's an accident, he couldn't possibly hear me way back in the stands, but at that very instant, Gordo raises his whip and jiggles it in front of the Saucy one's left eyeball. She doesn't bolt, she doesn't charge. She just switches gears and begins to roll.

What a beautiful sight. Ears up, hooves thundering, tail straight back. Gordo doesn't lay a stick on her. She just barrels home by four lengths. I turn to Paulie and give him a big smack on the lips. He's a bit scratchy, but I don't care. I stand up and hardly notice the stab in my back. I don't care if Paulie falls over on his face. I don't care about anything.

"I need a donut," I say. "Can I get you a donut?"

"I don't want nothin'."

"I'm sorry, Paulie."

“Muthafuckin’ piece of shit nag. It was Vaienza what gave ‘er the evil eye. As he went by. I saw it from here.”

“Hey, friend. We’re in this 50/50.”

“Yeah, 50/50 my ass. My 50 bucks just disappeared.”

“Maybe so did mine. I only got the top of this double and I still feel great.” I haven’t told him about the other.

“Don’t have the price of a donut. I was countin’ on it. The double. Countin’ on it.” He keeps whining, working himself into a lather.

“Paulie, come on.”

“Ah, leave me alone.”

I leave him alone and go for the donuts.

Race two is on us in a hurry and I am crazed with donut sugar. I have even gotten a cigarette in the john, strictly cheating, but the Ladies’ is fogged with smoke from other cheaters. I still haven’t told Paulie about my sneak bets, Rasputin over Paul’s Reward and Rasputin across the board. I’ll make him happy if I win. I’m thinking, what is making me this anxious to make a poor street guy smile? Make myself happy if I win and shut my mouth.

Back at the bench, I sit next to Paulie who is slumped with his chin on his chest. I hope he’s dozing. I have five new donuts in a white paper sack, leaking grease stains already.

The post parade begins—Dorset Boy, Renegade, Brisa, Paul’s Reward—the four looks good, better than I expected for an impulse buy. He’s a bay four year old, a gelding, with that juice head, Gordo, in the saddle. Maybe Gordo is still sober this early on the card. The colt is, as the rumor mongers said, coming off a rotten trip.

“Paulie, wake up, you should see this,” I say.

Paulie stirs and mumbles into his chest, but there is no rousing him. His T-shirt bandage has fallen to the ground between his legs and is now rusty brown with coagulated blood.

The parade moves on to the five horse, Dandy Dan, the favorite at two to one, then JimJams, the python lady call, with Eddie D. up. He’ll be in the six hole, rail side to Rasputin. My horse crosses the tv screen and I feel a drop in the barometer, like the air has been sucked out of the infield.

Rasputin is black with one white sock on the foreleg, okay, but his rear legs are swaddled in wraps, a sure signal of a problem that needs to be hidden. I would have seen it at the walking ring. I dope

out why his odds are getting longer by the minute. He's gone from eleven to one back up to the morning line, fifteen to one, tanking as soon as the crowd saw those nifty boots.

To make it worse, the regular rider, a boy from Golden Gate Fields, has been replaced by an apprentice from the Caldera, a dirt track on the Mexican border. Juan Valdez. I'm pretty sure that's not his real name.

Now, I let Paulie sleep. I don't even feel like a donut. I just sit quietly and wait for the disaster to unfold.

As they load, the camera pans across the jocks in the gate. When JimJams goes in, Eddie D. is hanging on to a bumpy ride. Suddenly, JimJams sits down and Eddie D. jumps back, hurdling over the rear gates into the dirt behind the horses. Rasputin has just gone in and there are two more colts to load. These two are walking quietly in circles, calm as you please. The fans have stilled to an eerie quiet, the only sound a flock of disoriented seagulls squawking around the infield pond. This is the worst. Rasputin is penned in the gate, shifting his weight from side to side.

As a crowd of men in Santa Anita blue surround JimJams, the fans find their vocal chords and begin to rank on the horse.

"Hit him with Eddie D's head!"

"Shoot the muthafucker."

They pull on his bridle, pinch his nostrils, whip his rump with the jock's stick. What looks like the colt's connections comes on to the field, but the stewards wave them back behind the rail. JimJams is down for the count.

Then, one genius steward lifts the horse's tail and pokes hard with the point of his roach stompers. JimJams is goosed to his feet. The crowd howls, the stewards back the colt out, Eddie D. is given a leg up into the saddle, and JimJams reloads like a pro.

In seconds, the two remaining horses load and the fans are in full throat waiting for the track announcer to call out, "They're off!" Meanwhile, in an effort to stop his jitters, Rasputin is now standing with hooves planted wide apart like a mare awaiting a stallion. Not good.

The starter sounds the bell and the gates fly open; Rasputin is, as they say, late. That's putting it kind. The horse is gazing around at the scenery. When he finally collects himself, he charges straight to the rail without saving a single step on the turn. If he jumped over

the rail, into the infield, I wouldn't have been surprised. He is dead last and scrambling to find his feet.

"Paulie, this is hilarious."

Paulie opens his eyes.

"Did we win?"

"Not yet."

Meanwhile, JimJams is bouncing off the back of the pack with all the jocks trying to steer clear. You can see a couple of riders yell at Eddie D. The horse is disoriented, he can't run in a straight line. Then, JimJams clips the horse in front, Renegade, and goes down. I see Eddie D. airborne, his black boots flipped over the horse's neck. Luckily, only Rasputin is coming on, and Rasputin is tight on the rail. No threat.

There is a chain reaction. Renegade, put off by the clip, veers in and bumps a horse on the rail, checks his stride, and stumbles into a hole. His jock senses something amiss in his pony's legs and eases him. Rasputin, without a plan, has now passed two horses.

In the lead pack, there is Paul's Reward running second. Of all things, Brisa at thirty to one is on the lead. I sense we may be in this after all. Now it is pure joy.

"I love ya, Juan Valdez," I yell. I stand in place, clutching my greasy donut bag, and lean towards the monitor. Paulie wakes up and squints at the set, looks at his card and squints again.

"That's the four," he says.

"Yeah, Paul's Reward."

"Not that piece of shit horse."

"That piece of shit horse is our horse."

"Waddya mean, 'our'?"

"Shut up and watch."

They make the turn and Brisa goes wide and runs out of gas. Paul's Reward ducks behind and is running one off the rail with a chance. He seems peppy, his ears are up and he has not changed his lead yet. He's wondering, who are all these other horses running in the same direction? Then Juan Valdez whacks him on the shoulder, whipping left handed. Paul's Reward changes his lead and starts to rumble.

Meanwhile, Rasputin has found his feet, socks and all. He passes Brisa who has faded back, threads between horses, angles behind Paul's Reward who is drifting out, winds up in second on the rail.

“Come on, baby. Come on, baby,” I whisper, teeth clenched.

Rasputin is charging. He’s gaining. They are noses apart, staring each other in the eye. Then, from nowhere, Rasputin jumps in the air, hurtling forward, as if he’s seen a demon on the track.

“What happened?”

“We won,” I say.

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“How’d we do it?”

“We had an Exacta with Rasputin over Paul’s Reward. I had a full house on Rasputin, and I had the double, Saucy Girl to Rasputin. It was fate.”

“And you call that ‘we’?”

Paulie leans back against the wall and sighs an immensely tired sigh; his eyes are glass, the mass of lacerated flesh over his eyes and cheek congealed now into a dark red pulp. I look down and realize that my grease stained paper sack of donuts is still lying unopened in my lap. When I unfold the crushed paper, cocoanut covered pastries send up a vanilla scented breeze.

I finger the winning stubs snuggled in my pocket. I’m not even sure how much we won, but maybe I could talk Paulie into a few days in Vegas. It would do him good, some good buffet and clean, dry air. Do us both good. Shrimp, lobster tails with lots of butter, iced crab claws. I feel pretty hungry right now. I bite into a chocolate old-fashioned and feel the saliva running under my tongue.