

Sugar Run Wild

by **Dennis “Suge” Thompson**

Red lies in bed at Israel Hospice. On Christmas Eve morning, he talks in semi-conscious lucidity about Keats and Emerson, Man-O-War and Secretariat, his speech affected by the intravenous pain medications. A self-educated person and my friend for twenty-five years, Red is the best horse handicapper I've met and will likely ever meet, which is one of the reasons I love him. A polymath, he could pick a horse by its gait, its speed breaks, and its shift in class, all the while making some obscure reference to *Leda and the Swan* by Yeats.

Red and I met at Fairgrounds Park in New Orleans. I was an unemployed letter carrier and a novice handicapper. He was a hot walker for the biggest trainer at the thoroughbred meet that spring in '89. On that day I'd paced the paddock, trying to figure the form and get a clue as to which horse would make me money. Living on a broke man's budget, I knew I had to lay off most races and could only play the ones that would produce a payoff. I watched a large red-haired man lead the nine horse during the post parade, giving the jockey a one-leg lift into the irons before coming out onto the apron to watch the race at the fence.

He stood next me, and without taking his eyes off the nine horse, he asked, "You bet this race yet, bud?"

"Not yet. Still working the numbers."

"You'd be smart to go twenty across the board on Dante's Devil Dog. Way underplayed at 20/1."

"Your horse?"

"I work him. He's fit and ready. I'm just telling you the smart bet, friend."

I thought about his tip and watched the chestnut gelding stretch well with each forward step. A big-boned horse with straight legs and well-sprung ribs, his overall confirmation showed endurance and late speed.

“Why is he at long odds?” I asked.

“Hasn’t been raced for nine months. He finished seventh his last outing; lung bleeding slowed him in that race. He’s on Lasix now. Had a bullet workout three weeks ago. I’m not sure why no one’s picked up on that. He’ll run well.”

“Bet big or go home,” I said.

He looked at me and smiled as I walked to the betting window. I dropped twenty across the board on the nine. Sweat from my palm made the ticket damp as I watched the nine horse load. We stood there together not saying a word as the steel slammed shut and the bell rang out the madness racing into the wind. Dante’s Devil Dog broke clean but slowly on the outside, cutting to the inside rail on the turn. He trailed the field through the backstretch, and I could feel anger welling up. Red said nothing. At the $\frac{3}{4}$ pole, he raised his hand like he was pulling a trigger, and the nine horse made a move, weaving through traffic until he cut away into center track. Head up and full stride, Shane Romero moved him from off the pace to the three spot. Seventy yards from the wire without lifting the whip, Dante’s Devil Dog won with a head bob across the finish. I screamed and hugged the big man standing next to me who’d made my paycheck for the week. We became partners that day.

During the following months at Fair Grounds Park, Red and I spent time talking horses and his life. I learned he’d been born in New York and moved to a farm in Iowa at age eleven. He’d spent his early years around horses and learned to trust them more than people. After a stint in the Navy and a tour in Vietnam, he settled in Mobile, Alabama, where he married a young woman, Cassie LeBlanc, from Slidell, Louisiana.

He and Cassie lived a quiet life, moving to a small house on the corner of N. Dupre and Castiglione Street, a few blocks from the racetrack. He said their time together was the happiest in his life. She worked at a department store on North Broad Street, and he began training a small field of local horses. Together, they made a modest income and had plenty of time to live and love. Red’s life changed one foggy morning when a police cruiser pulled up outside the stable on the backside of the track. Two officers and the racing secretary met him in his tack room. He said he could tell by the look on their faces that something bad had happened. His wife Cassie had been

struck broadside during her drive to work. That morning was the start of what he called his missing years.

In December 1986, after sixteen years of marriage, Red packed his pickup camper and everything he planned to carry with him, heading east on I-90 across the South. He spent the next two years bumming through Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. He worked day labor in fruit groves and fishing boats, saving up enough money to get by until the next opportunity came along. He worked hard when he worked, drank hard when he didn't. His life took a turn when he showed up at Tampa Downs outside of Tampa, Florida.

Red pulled up at Tampa Downs in January 1988. He had been given a work lead by a friend on a fishing boat in Tarpon Springs. When he walked into the racing secretary's office to inquire about a job as a hot walker, he was met at the door by an old trainer he'd known at Fair Grounds Race Track. They talked for over an hour, and Red walked away with a job working throughout the upcoming meet in Tampa. Being back around horses centered him, settling him and his desire to roam. He returned to New Orleans in the fall of '88

After we met that spring of '89, I was rehired in the summer to work as a mail handler at the Bulk Mail Center in New Orleans. I worked the night shift, leaving plenty of time to handicap the matinees and the early evening race cards. In the fall, Red moved into an apartment with me in Metairie. Twenty years my senior, Red and I lived like brothers, sharing expenses and life experiences. After ten years together in New Orleans, we decided to move to Phoenix and take up horse training at Turf Paradise. Red built a strong stable of competitive thoroughbreds. We spent the next thirteen years living in Phoenix during the winter and spring, then travelling to Canterbury Park in Shakopee, Minnesota, for the summer and fall.

The week before Labor Day in 2013, Red came home from the track exhausted and running a low-grade fever. After several days, he turned jaundiced and ached in his abdomen and ribs. I took him to the doctor where he underwent a battery of tests and an MRI. The results came back positive for pancreatic cancer. We spent the next months in and out Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, and in early

December, the doctor shared the news. Red was terminal. His final request was to travel back to Iowa to live out his last days.

Christmas morning, I'm reading "A Child's Christmas in Wales" to Red. He stares out the window, having not eaten for three days. The nurse had told me that he'll soon stop taking fluids as his body shuts down. When I stop, he tells me he'd heard Dylan Thomas perform the piece at one of his last readings in New York in 1953, shortly before his death. Even though he was only eight years old when he heard Thomas read, Red recites the opening lines, impersonating Thomas's melancholy Welsh accent. I stroke his thinning red hair, his forehead warm with fever.

"Can I get you anything? Some water?"

He smiles a toothless grin. He whispers, "Do you remember the bridge jumper at Turf Paradise?"

"How could I forget," I say. "I damn near killed you for that hot tip."

"Tell me the story the way you remember it, Suge."

Betting a bridge jumper is betting against the big money at a track. Every so often, a gambler will put big money down on a "sure bet" horse, say \$200,000 to show on the favorite. It's called a bridge jumper because if the bet doesn't pay, the gambler is likely to jump off a bridge. The bridge jumper bet throws the pari-mutuel board for a crazy run with the odds on all other horses going through the roof. The smart bettor will play the high odds horses to show, hoping the "sure bet" will finish fourth and out of the money.

"We were sitting under an umbrella table on the apron. You'd taken the day off and were sipping a pina colada."

"Mai Tai," he says, "By the way, I've never taken a day off."

I hold his hand and feel him squeeze it. He winks and smiles.

"Sorry, Suge. Go on."

"I was ready to bet the horse Sugar Run Wild when the board dropped on it."

Red grins. "You just liked her name. You didn't even know her speed breaks or class."

"I remember sitting down disgusted and pissed. You rechecked the form and told me to go three hundred to show on the five horse Gotanaceupersleeve. You said that filly was my ace."

"That's how I remember it," he says. "Keep going."

"An ace my ass."

"Now you're getting worked up," he says with a grin.

"I jumped up, trotted to the window with one minute to post. Stood in line behind some old bastard reading his bets off a crib sheet. I dropped three bills on your pick as the bell rang, then turned to watch the five stumble from the gate."

"Oh shit. Here it comes." Red sighs, still smiling.

"You spilled your drink standing up to watch, then shook your head before sitting back down. This all sounding familiar?"

He nods. I feel his grip strengthen, then relax.

"You wanted to push me off the bridge when Sugar Run Wild came across in first."

"Yeah. Damn right. Gotanaceupersleeve had quite the neck stretch at the finish. Too bad she was dead last."

He laughs and coughs. "You stuck with me, even after the loss."

I smile. "What choice did I have? You drove that day."

"True."

"Like you always said, three hundred bucks is running money between friends. You slipped three bills in my pocket and told me to bet the nine across the board in the next race."

"And how did that turn out?"

"Friendsinlowplaces paid across the board at 5-1. We were solid again."

Red's head rolls to the side. His gentle eyes stare out the window. His grip loosens. His breath a whisper.

"We still solid, Suge?"

He closes his eyes. His breathing becomes faint, stops, then starts with a gasp. I lean forward, kiss his sunken cheek.

"Always, buddy. All the way to the wire."



Dennis "Suge" Thompson is a former U. S. Postal Service letter carrier and horse handicapper. He now teaches writing and film at Des Moines Area Community College. His work has appeared in *Mississippi Review*, *Colere Literary Review*, *Out of Line: Writings on Peace and Social Justice*, *Birch Gang Review*, and *Literary Orphans*. His fiction "Jesus in the Eighth Race" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.