

THINGS AS THEY ARE

Guy Vanderhaeghe



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Things As They Are

“Vanderhaeghe creates vivid, credible characters.... [These stories] draw the reader into the dramatic tensions that arise from people living at cross purposes.... Vanderhaeghe is an important voice....”

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“Guy Vanderhaeghe is extraordinarily adept at taking readers beyond the visible surface and into the emotional heart of his characters.... His vivid prose takes the reader into the skin of his creations.”

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“*Things As They Are* is a terrific collection, full of memorable and moving characters vividly rendered.”

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The Englishman's Boy (1996)
The Last Crossing (2002)

PLAYS

- I Had a Job I Liked. Once.* (1991)
Dancock's Dance (1995)

G U Y V A N D E R H A E G H E

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SERIES EDITOR: ELLEN SELIGMAN

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To Morris Wolfe

with thanks for help and
encouragement from the beginning

Contents



Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

King Walsh

Man on Horseback

The Master of Disaster

Ray

New Houses

Teacher

Fraud

Home Place

Loneliness Has Its Claims

Things As They Are?

Acknowledgments

About the Author



KING CALLED ME LONG DISTANCE from the city again last night. He said, “They’re warning me to stay clear of Putt ’N’ Fun Town, leave off playing the mini-golf.”

“King,” I said.

“I ain’t going to do it,” he said.

“Whatever you think is best, King,” I said.

“Just so you know what’s really going on here,” he declared and hung up.

King is my brother. He’s seven years older than me, turned seventy-eight last January. We were raised in Advance and both of us lived our whole lives here, until recent circumstances took King out of the city.

Everybody in Advance knows King Walsh. For seventy years more heads were wagged in this town over King Walsh’s mistakes than any other baker’s dozen of ordinary men. But King got forgiven his little errors, people liked him all the better for making them, and it didn’t hurt either that brother had a smile could light up a coal bin. However, the difference between an old man’s mistakes and a young man’s is that the ones the old man makes he’s probably got to live with the rest of his life. King is learning that now, living his big mistake, the one that’s trapped him in a basement suite in his son’s house there in the city.



Albert Walker met up with King and me that day in the beer parlour and talked us into going along with him as moral support to The Senior Silver Jets’ Wednesday afternoon Singles’ Dance. So moral support sat on tin chairs watching a couple dozen old widows dancing the foxtrot with each other and throwing us boys the hopeful come hither looks. I been a bachelor all my life, and like it that way, so I kept my eyes mostly wherever theirs weren’t.

Tell the truth she was a pretty lean stag line, consisting of just four old bucks – King, Albert Walker, me, and Rudy Schmidt, who was acting as master of ceremonies because he’d been a cattle auctioneer before he retired and so was accustomed to public speaking. Now Rudy is a professional when it comes to talking but even he can’t hold a candle to Albert Walker. King was catching the brunt of it, that endless rambling on about this and that and a hundred per cent of nothing. But all of a sudden, out of the blue, Albert says something of interest. “King, remember that night you danced every dance on one leg at Kinbrae School?”

King said he sure as hell did.

The summer of 1935 was what they were talking about, the summer King broke his ankle, the summer I was fifteen and King had me drive his car out to Kinbrae School on a soft, starry night because he couldn’t work the clutch with a cast on. My brother was twenty-two that summer, his hair red and full as a rooster’s comb, and him a one-legged dancing fool. That night in Kinbrae he danced with every woman that didn’t drive him off with a stick when he hopped up to her. Thirty-three answered the call – not many women ever refused King. His chums slung his arms over their shoulders and poured rye into him between tunes and the band agreed to play through the midnight lunch so King didn’t cool down, go stiff, and bind up. Come two in the morning there were still more than twenty ladies, some old enough to have been his mother, lined up for a second go around. “Dead before dishonour,” King said and jolted through the entire mixed assortment. Last partner of the band was Elsie Macintosh. The sun was standing in the window and her anxious father in the door when the

band collapsed from exhaustion and the curtain came down on the spectacle. King married Elsie twenty years later. I wonder how many times she wished she could have took that final dance back.

“Those days are long gone now, aren’t they, King? All the good times in the past,” said Albert with a mournful last-day-of-summer sound to his voice.

If there’s one thing that King never could stand, it was a pisser and a moaner. So naturally he contradicted him on principle. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Well,” said Albert, “your one-legged dancing days are a thing of the past. I know that much.”

“Ha!” said King.

“You couldn’t even *stand* on one leg,” said Albert. “Remember, you’re seventy-six years old.”

Seventy-six or not, King got up and showed him. He wobbled some but he stood.

“Maybe you can stand,” allowed Albert, “but you sure as hell can’t dance.”

Red flag to the bull. King scrambled to his feet, bellowing at auctioneer Rudy to get a goddam polka on the goddamn turntable. Rudy said that wouldn’t do, the ladies found the polka too energetic for their time of life. Pardon his English, but ladies be damned! roared my brother. King Walsh was going to dance all around the hall – and do it on one leg. For that, a polka was required.

Soon all the biddies had him surrounded and were clucking against rashness, but I could tell from the brightness of their eyes they truly hoped King would not be persuaded. He wasn’t. Give credit where credit is due though. None of those women agreed to dance with him; they knew better than to risk life and limb in the arms of a madman. She was a sight for sore eyes, that horse’s ass in the middle of the floor up on one leg like one of those pink flamingoes, his arms held out just as if they were cradling a woman.

Rudy dropped the needle on “The Beer Barrel Polka,” King took his first hop, and the sidelines erupted in wild applause. And kept it up. The harder those old girls clapped and hooted, the bigger the head of steam King built, jerking and jiggling and bouncing along with his tongue hanging out like a three-legged dog. Halfway around the dance floor he negotiated his first fancy turn and the crowd went berserk. “Give ’er, King! Give ’er, you old son of a bitch!” Rudy shouted in his auctioneer voice.

King gave her. Let me say he was never shy of being the centre of attention. His bearings were starting to smoke and he was leaking oil, but he cranked her up three more notches and gave a kick every turn he twisted out. Around and around he went, the widows clapping, and the old bucks hooting and stamping their feet until the dust started to lift from between the floorboards. King was showing them one hell of a good time, just like he had his whole life long.

It was different with me. There, right in the midst of the hullabaloo, something peculiar happened I never felt the like, before or since. Those fifty-five years that lay between a summer night in Kinross School and where I stood now, all that time folded in on me. Yesterday, today, even tomorrow, all of it went crooked and confused in my mind, I couldn’t separate one from the other. That woman King had tucked in his arms – that invisible woman – was Elsie the way she was that night many long years ago, slim and fair. Or maybe as she would have been if she hadn’t died in 1967 – old and tired like King and me. It was a lovely and terrible feeling both, the ends of life drawing in on you like that without warning.

Then King’s hip bone snapped like a piece of chalk and down he dropped in a heap.

The doctor ambulanced him to the city to have the hip replacement, they can’t do nothing that complicated in our hospital here in Advance. To cut a long story short, they operate, King catches

pneumonia, almost dies, and then, soon as he can lift his head from the pillow, he starts agitating for release. They manage to hold him there for a time but in the end he gets an early discharge, on condition he promises not to live alone while he heals. This means moving in with his only child, Sonny and precious daughter-in-law Myra.

Myra is Sonny's second wife and has a tight little mouth that looks like a cigarette burn on a plastic car seat cover. Lucy, the wife King liked, divorced Sonny about eight years ago. King's never forgotten the day she drove herself out from the city to tell him she was going to ditch his boy and brought along a bottle of Crown Royal to do it with. As soon as King saw the whisky he started in speculating what could be behind it. It came into his head maybe Lucy was in the family way. That's the only news King could think of that went with a bottle of quality whisky. But, no, after she poured out a couple of shots at the kitchen table Lucy delivered her announcement. "King," she said, "I'm here to tell you I'm leaving Sonny."

Now this was a bigger blow than you might think it was, because King was struck on Lucy. By this I don't mean to say that he was cutting Sonny's grass or even eager to – although with King and women a person can never be certain of anything. What I mean is that I think King may have loved his daughter-in-law the way he had loved his dead wife Elsie, for the things she was and he wasn't.

An even bigger surprise came when he asked her how Sonny was taking it and Lucy said, "I haven't told Sonny. I left this morning with the car packed. As far as Sonny's concerned, I'm tail-lights."

King asked her what the hell she was up to, treating Sonny so inconsiderate.

Lucy looked him straight in the eye and said, "If I thought anybody would understand, I believed it would be you, King. Admit it. You can't stand being more than an hour in the same room with Sonny."

King denied this, even though what Lucy said is true. He just kept repeating that this was one shit show a way for Lucy to behave.

"Don't get holier than thou with me," Lucy told him. "From what Sonny says, you skipped out on him twice yourself."

"It wasn't Sonny I walked out on," King said. "It was his mother. And I'll tell you something else about Lucy. I never made two bigger mistakes in my life."

"Let me tell you something, King," Lucy said. "I never got much out of seven years of marriage with Sonny, but I did learn something from seven years of watching you."

King asked what that might be.

"To take a chance on any number of mistakes as long as you make them running after life. I always had a soft spot for you, King," she said. "So let's make this goodbye a friendly one. And let's drink to life."

You can be sure that King never refused a drink to life. Which is how it came about that he was the one who said goodbye to his son's wife and toasted his son's divorce before Sonny even heard about it.

King surely hated the hospital. Not for any normal reason, but mostly because the doctors and nurses insisted on calling him Mr. Walsh. He wouldn't shut his mouth on the topic. I heard about it every time I visited.

"I can't get them to call me King," he said. "Nothing but Mr. Walsh."

"Maybe it's a rule," I suggested, "calling patients mister." I didn't suggest maybe he'd turned them stubborn, bullying them to have his way.

"They ought to call a person by their name," he said.

“Well, come to that, King isn’t your birth certificate name,” I reminded him. “You aren’t really King.” It was our Auntie Vi that gave him the name when he was three years old and strutting around my mother’s parlour bold as brass. She said, “Now look at that one. Don’t he act like he thinks he’s future King of England.” And King he’s been for seventy-five years since. Nobody ever said it didn’t suit him.

King’s got mad at me a time or two in his life, but never as mad as he was the day I told him his name wasn’t really King. “I’ve never been nothing but King and by the Jesus nobody’s going to change that now! Why do you think they want to mister everybody? I’ll tell you why! It’s easier to stack you here and stack you there if everybody’s the same size, size mister! Call me King!” I shouted out the door and down the hospital corridor. “Give me my name back, goddamn it!”

Once King escaped City Hospital I knew he was never going back. It had put the fear of the Almighty God into him. If he hadn’t been scared, none of what Sonny said would have had any effect on him. King would have done what he originally intended – gone back to his house in Advance.

But Sonny kept picking away at him. “You want to land up in hospital again, Dad? What if you fall in that house with nobody to help you? Don’t be silly. Come live with us, Dad.”

Of course, nobody knew that Sonny was promoting this charitable idea because the bank was threatening to take the house he was inviting his father to come live in. This was a result of Sonny overselling his financial situation to Myra when they were dating. Naturally when they marry, Myra has expectations, so Sonny buys her a house big enough and expensive enough to match the lies he’s been telling her. For a while he just manages to carry the mortgage and then the recession hits, his commissions go in the crapper, he misses a few payments, and the bank starts clearing its throat. Still for shame, Sonny won’t come clean with Myra. He’d rather go to work on King. “Come live with us, Dad. We got the suite in the basement standing empty, your own bathroom, fridge, stove. Sell the house in Advance.”

The really important part of this pitch is the part about selling the house, because it’s the only way Sonny can get a sizeable sum of cash into King’s hands where it can be pried loose. Finally, King caves in and sells. No sooner is the cheque deposited than Sonny comes out with his sorry tale of woe. He’s in temporary difficulties because of the economy, the GST. The goddamn government is a vampire, it’s drinking his blood. The bank is a vulture picking his bones clean. But if the money from the sale of the house in Advance was used as a lump payment to reduce his mortgage to a manageable size, he could breathe again. Don’t misunderstand him, Sonny says. If he only had himself to think about, the bankers could take it, flinty-hearted cocksuckers. But Myra, it’s her dream home, she loves it, the air-conditioning, central vacuum, Jenn-Air grill, the underground sprinkler system, the chandelier in the dining room – he can’t imagine what the shock of losing it would do to her.

When King tells Sonny he’ll think about it, Sonny starts to cry. He’s King’s fucking son, he says. Look what he’s offering in return for a few measly bucks: a home rent-free for life, utilities paid, people willing to look out for him. The whole package, tied up with a ribbon of love.

This information comes to me via King’s late-night, longdistance phone calls. They’re coming fast and furious now that he’s getting the heavy-duty pressure over Putt ’N’ Fun.

Sure, he says, room and board with his son is probably not the smartest thing he’s ever done. But imagine what it’s like to sit and watch a forty-eight-year-old man, your own flesh and blood, bawling the way he did when he was in short pants. What else could he do but write the cheque, fifty-five thousand dollars? It’s only money, after all.

So here’s my brother, seventy-eight, no money, no house, nothing signed, no paper trail to prove what he did for Sonny. What makes it worse is that Myra has no idea about the fifty-five thousand

because Sonny made King swear he'd never tell her. And he won't. King's always been a stickler when it comes to his word. That's why I get the phone calls. Sonny forgot to specify me in the promise.

Now spring's here and another season of mini-golf has started up, King and Sonny and Myra aren't exactly seeing eye to eye. The other day Sonny told King that playing mini-golf is ridiculous and undignified for a man his age. Myra added, "And let's not forget the spot of trouble you got in last year. Next, we'll be facing accusations of you know what."

King wanted to know what "you know what" was.

"Dad, it looks bad an old man hanging around where kids congregate," Sonny says. "You watch the TV, you know what we're talking about. Myra doesn't think you should go there any more, and I agree."

King goes to great pains explaining to me over the telephone how nobody's going to mistake him for a child molester. Why, the facts all contradict it. For one thing, he only went to Putt 'N' Fun where the kids were supposed to be in school. Ask the owner, ask Lila, if that isn't the case. Last year's spot of trouble would never have happened if those delinquents hadn't been playing hookey ten o'clock on a Monday morning.

It's early morning that King prefers for Putt 'N' Fun, he likes the course deserted and all to himself. Nobody but him in the streets of Putt 'N' Fun Town, everything quiet and still, the sun shining on the gingerbread house, the little brown church in the vale, the old mill with the water wheel, Mother Hubbard's shoe, the red schoolhouse. King says you got to see the whole layout to appreciate it. It's a work of art. Lila's husband made the new buildings winters when Putt 'N' Fun Town closed down for the season. It took him years and years. According to Lila, her hubby was a perfectionist, and there aren't many mini-golf courses of such detail, such high-class construction and calibre anywhere else in the world. Take the church in the vale. It even has a tiny bell in the steeple. The kids are always ringing it despite the big DO NOT RING THE BELL sign, and the noise plays on her nerves. Every time she hears the bell tolling it makes her think of her husband who'll be dead five years this coming January. She's thinking of having it removed and put in storage.

King says, "It's so nice there that sometimes I forget my game and just start roaming the streets. I leave my ball rest in a hole and wander. She sees this, Lila hollers from the booth, 'Penny for your thoughts! Penny for your thoughts!' But I don't take no pennies for no thoughts. I just give Lila a wave over the roofs."

King claims Lila was surprised to hear he was a barber for fifty years. "People think of a barber they think bow-tie, Hush Puppies maybe. They think neat and skinny," said King.

King did his level best to never look an ordinary barber. He wore cowboy boots to work and knocked off a hundred pushups before he unlocked the door in the morning and another hundred before he locked the door at night. He built himself big arms to match a big swagger.

King was an unusual barber. He'd call kids from Social Assistance families in off the street and give them no-charge haircuts and tell them it was on the house because he needed the practice. An old man he knew was hard-up, King never took a cent from. "Can't make change for that today. Next time. Next time," he'd say, waving payment off.

Some louts and layabouts got the wrong idea from this, they figured King for a soft touch. "Cat

you next time, my good man,” Harvey Ferguson would say, climbing out of the chair. Harvey had eighteen months of haircuts on tick when one day King threw a head-lock on him in the chair. He squealed like a stuck pig, but King buried the clippers to his scalp, yanked him out of the chair, and pitched him into the street with a furrow through his thatch like a line down blacktop. Nobody knew what set it off. I asked King, in private.

“Because he farted,” said King. “Here the son of a bitch owes me for a year and a half of haircuts and he can’t make the little bit of extra effort to pinch one back when I’m working on him? No. Harvey just lets her drift free and easy, like he’s a rose in the Rose Bowl Parade. Well, I *drifted* him. I showed him a *parade*.”

You’d believe King’s unpredictability would be held against him but it wasn’t. It was appreciated. Some smirking fool was always sidling up to me. “Hear what your brother done now?” he’d ask.

The most unpredictable thing King ever done was run after Ruby Diehl. Given all the girls he’d had or could have had, who’d ever have thought he’d fall for a woman like her? And, strange to say, he pleased people that King Walsh could lose his head over a homely woman.

Ruby tried, after a fashion, to make herself attractive. Unfortunately, her home dye jobs came out the colour of one of those creosote-treated railroad ties, a streaky, oily, rusty-black. Painting her fingernails and toenails wasn’t such a good idea either because it drew attention to the size of her feet and hands, which was considerable. Too much face powder in the summer only succeeded in making her eyes and nose look all the redder and runnier when she was suffering from hay fever.

Ruby operated the switchboard for the town telephone exchange out of her father’s clapboard house. Details which give some indication of how long ago all this happened. Ruby was not King’s first flirt since he’d heard wedding bells. Already there had been the sort of girl who make themselves available to men like King, but never anything serious. I knew about these women because King got in the habit of asking me to lend him the use of an unoccupied room in the hotel where I worked as desk clerk. I didn’t like to oblige him, but I knew it was better he put himself in my hands rather than somebody else’s who might talk. I wanted no hurt to come to Elsie.

Ruby Diehl wasn’t cut on the pattern of those other girls though. The ladies in Advance might deplore the way she trowelled the paint on, but there had never been a word spoken against her reputation. All that make-up was just spinster silliness, a woman thirty-five trying to lose ten years with a compact, they said.

I must have been one of the first to spot them together, although I didn’t think anything of it at the time. Out driving in the country one Sunday afternoon, inspecting the crops, I met King’s Ford on the road. I had to look twice to be sure I saw what I saw – little Sonny (he must have been about two years old then), standing up on the front seat between King and Ruby. Now that’s strange, I said to myself. I never knew Elsie and Ruby were friendly. Because Ruby and King was so impossible a connection I never made it. I just assumed Ruby was in charge of the baby to give Elsie a break since King couldn’t be trusted to do a proper job – wiping up shit and snot being beneath him.

But then people began to question me about my brother and Ruby. From the doubtful tone of their voices I could tell they couldn’t believe what the signs were pointing to, and figured I had a good explanation for it. But I didn’t. For the life of me, I didn’t know why King and Ruby were taking Sunday drives in broad daylight, or why he had been seen slinking outside Diehl’s house when dusk was coming on, walking slowly up and down the sidewalk with a desperate hunch to his shoulders.

I knew my brother, I knew if I asked him for the straight goods he wouldn’t lie. He was relieved and glad to talk to somebody about it. King seemed bewildered by what had happened to him, the strange way it had started. You see, Ruby had asked him to come to her father’s house to cut the old man

hair. Her father had begun to wander in his mind. She was worried that he might cause embarrassment in the barbershop. He said filthy words out loud.

So King had done as she asked because he could always be made to feel sorry for people. And when it came time to settle up, he didn't want to take any money for a neighbourly act, but Ruby kept insisting and insisting until finally he told her that all the payment he wanted for cutting the old man's hair was a kiss from his pretty daughter. Now King meant this as a joke and never expected poor Ruby to take him up on it, but she did. She kissed him and then she kept right on kissing him. According to King there was no stopping her.

All right, I said, you made a mistake but *this* has got to stop. There's talk already. Taking Sonny out of the car with you when you go driving with Ruby Diehl won't protect her good name any more. She's a lonely woman and it's wrong to lead her on. You have to break this off.

"Maybe I don't want to break this off," said King. "Maybe I can't."

It was true. From the look on his face I could see it was true. He had tried to stay away from her but he found he couldn't. He'd swear off Ruby, then turn around the next minute and telephone her to make an appointment behind the lilacs. This was how they spoke of adultery, behind the lilacs. When it got dark, Ruby stole out of the house with a blanket and lay down behind the Diehls' lilac hedge to wait for King to come to her. The hedge stood flush against the sidewalk. Occasionally they heard footsteps and their passion would turn to stone, the two of them hardly breathing until the passersby rounded the corner. King said when they went absolutely still like that and waited, all the world stood brave and clear to him in a way he had never known before, he could feel the stars staring down, the heavenly sweetness of the lilacs pressing in, the damp grass under his hands. He could feel the life in everything around him, the life in himself.

When a man talks in such a peculiar way, you know the thing is far from being over. By winter when they were up to was common knowledge in the town and neither one seemed to be making much effort to hide it. As her father grew sicker and feebler in his mind, Ruby had less to fear from him, and she began inviting King into the house. After a light snow, a man's footprints could be plainly seen on the walk to the Diehls' door.

Anybody else but King would have run the risk of being laughed at for taking up with a woman older than himself, and an unbecoming one to boot. But not King. To the beer-parlour crowd he was a hero.

"She was saving it all those years. You know how crazy they get saving it."

"Itching for it."

"And King owns the scratcher."

"If I know King, he's got more than scratching up his sleeve. Mark my word, boys, there's gold in them there hills. Old Diehl has deep pockets."

"Fucking King. He was born lucky."

"You got to make your luck. There she was sitting on that little toy all those years, but it was King who unwrapped it and taught her how much fun it was."

"That son of a bitch."

Shortly after old man Diehl died, King and Ruby ran off together for the first time. My brother left a letter for me at the hotel asking me to break the news to Elsie. All Elsie said was, "We'll see." In forty-eight hours, hardly enough time for anyone but a wife or brother to notice they had gone missing, the two of them were back in town. During this elopement King had only one topic of conversation, Elsie's goodness and kindness. Ruby told him if that's the way he felt, they'd better turn the car around and go back to their former lives.

But in a matter of weeks King had had his fill of goodness and kindness and was back carrying on with Ruby Diehl like there was no tomorrow. It went on like this for two years, Ruby pressing him to make a choice and King delaying. Meanwhile Ruby was changing, she stopped painting and powdering her face, polishing her nails, dying her hair. Bit by bit her experience with King was teaching her confidence.

This may seem a strange claim to make when you consider that the second time they ran away together the same thing happened as the first. King sang Elsie's praises in every hotel room they stopped at, which seems to me a sure way to destroy a woman's confidence. But obviously it didn't injure Ruby's. She hopped a train in Winnipeg, headed east. King came back to Elsie and me.

The other night when the phone rang I expected it to be King. It was Sonny.

"Dad's gone and done it again," he said. "We're losing our patience here, Myra and me."

"What's he done?"

"The police brought him home last night."

"What's he done, Sonny?" I demanded.

"They picked him up roaming around that mini-golf course in the dead of night. Way past midnight. Myra and me didn't even know he'd slipped out of the house. He climbed a fence to get into Putt 'N' Fun. It's only about three feet high but God knows how he got over it with that bum hip of his. The police saw somebody moving around in there and suspected vandals so they went in to check on it. Sonny paused. "He tried to run from them."

"Jesus."

"You ask me, he's losing his marbles," said Sonny. "He goes there every single morning, doesn't miss a day, and now he's climbing fences in the middle of the night."

"What was he doing in there?"

"Search me. The police say he was just walking around, they thought maybe they heard him talking to himself. He isn't talking now though. I can't get anything out of him. No way he'll confess what he was up to. Could be he doesn't know himself. I hate to say it about my own father, but I don't think he's too sound in the head anymore. We try to discuss the situation with him but we get nowhere."

"He was always stubborn," I said.

I could hear Sonny take a deep breath on the other end of the line. "This Putt 'N' Fun is no joke. It mean you just can't go making free with people's private property like that. And then look what happened last summer with that boy. He keeps hanging out there it's bound to happen again. As Myra says, 'It's only a matter of time.' He doesn't know how lucky he was last year. If that friend of his, that Lila woman, hadn't lied for him, God knows the hole we'd have had to dig him out of."

I hadn't moved on to consider any of that. All I could think of was King wandering up and down the little dark streets, talking to himself. It made me cold, frightened.

"You know," said Sonny, "Myra and me, we're coming to the conclusion that maybe the city isn't the place for him. There's too many ways he can get into trouble here. Dad's not a city person. He doesn't belong here."

Sonny waited for me to take the bait. But what am I supposed to do with King? All the accommodation I've got is the single I rent in the hotel where I worked all my life. I got no room for him.

"You struck a bargain, Sonny," I told him. "Keep your end of it."

Sonny claimed he didn't know what I was talking about.

Most people in Advance took King for nothing but a gay dog. Elsie and I saw the other side of him, the hidden side which moves him to climb fences, slouch up and down empty streets in the dark, mutter himself. What Sonny's first wife Lucy said about King, about him running after life, was true. But King's got no clear notion of what "life" is, except maybe that it's the opposite of unhappiness. King was determined not to be unhappy.

The mood would creep up on him like a shadow. He might smile, even laugh, but if you watched him careful you'd notice it was only the muscles of his face doing a job. Everything was rote – the way he cut and combed hair, even the way his flat, empty laughter joined with everybody else's. At our regular Friday-night poker game I gave him a nudge to remind him to crow if he won, or curse if he lost. He drank his whisky like water and it had no effect. At home he lay on the sofa with a newspaper spread over his face, or sat in front of the radio, switching from one station to the other without pause, hearing nothing. He lost his appetite for everything but black coffee. There were times his hands shook so bad he had to hide them in his pockets.

No, nothing's wrong, he used to say.

Needing King back we got frightened, Elsie and me.

Sonny must have been reminding him of last summer. Every time he does, King phones to explain himself.

"They kept running up my heels," he said. "I was too slow for them."

"I know, King. I heard all this before."

"They were sniggering at me, him and the girl."

"You got to learn to ignore them, King."

"I was trying to line up a four-foot putt on the Hansel and Gretel hole. But I couldn't do her, not with all that giggling going on behind me. A fellow can't concentrate, those circumstances."

"They find old people funny, King."

"A sixteen year old wears his shorts ten sizes too big, hanging down past his knees, that's funny. What's he expect – to grow into them? Make up your mind, I wanted to tell him, don't get caught in no man's land. And you should have seen what the girl has printed on her T-shirt, little whore. It said 'If it swells, ride it.' Can you believe that? 'If it swells, ride it.' Jesus."

"Was a time you'd have been one hundred per cent in agreement with the sentiment, King."

"That's not the point. The point is, I'm nobody's joke. So I turns around and I says to him, 'If you want to laugh at me, don't do it behind my back. Be a man. Do it to my face.'"

"Which he did." I reminded him.

"'Chill out, dude,' the kid says. I says, 'Tie your goddamn shoe-laces.' He was slopping along in these untied sneakers, it got on my nerves. 'Don't tell him what to do,' says the girl. 'You're not his old man.'

"'And a goddamn lucky thing for him I'm not,' I said. 'Or he'd have been fed to the pigs when his bones were soft.'

"'Oh, like wow, what have we got here? Excellent rural humour? Reruns of Jed Clampett and 'The Beverly Hillbillies?'" That's seriously droll,' the kid says. 'Melissa, did you catch what Jed said?' And they start with the laughing again.

"I tell him the name's King, not Jed. He says, 'King? King of what? King Shit of Turd Island?'"

"I warn him if he's looking for trouble he's come to the right place. 'When I finish with you sunshine,' I says, 'you won't know if your ass's been punched or bored.' 'What's that,' he says

'faggot talk?' I show him my fist. He thinks this is funny. For kids like him, old people are just somebody you knock over getting on and off buses. I never took shit from anybody my whole life. I'm going to start now?"

"So you popped him."

"Goddamn right I popped him."

"With the putter."

"No putter. I give him the knuckle sandwich."

"From what I heard, the kid and his girlfriend claim you hit him with the putter."

"Conflicting testimony. What's he going to say, he gets laid out by a seventy-eight year old with hip replacement? Lila seen it. She told the cops I punched him."

"Lila also said he pushed you first. I didn't hear you say that."

"Lila's a good girl. The fucking law is all technicalities. There's no self-defence unless he pushed me first."

"So she lied."

"Lila saw what Lila saw."

"His father threatened to sue, didn't he? For chipping the kid's tooth?"

"Jesus, can you believe it? I'm supposed to pay for the milk he didn't buy the kid? I told the bastard if he bought the kid a little milk to drink, his teeth wouldn't chip so easy."

"You shouldn't have done it, King. It's a different world now."

"You're glad I done it. The story of my life. Guys like you waiting for me to do what you shit-eaters don't dare."

Those moods of King's that Elsie and I feared would never lift, when they did, they lifted like spring comes to this part of the world, in a rush, ice to water. Saturday was the day he picked for thawing, the day the farmers came to town. "All work and no play makes King a dull boy," he would say, signalling the change which was coming over him. When she heard that, Elsie would phone the hotel to let me know she believed her husband, my brother, was back. He wasn't going in to work that Saturday.

King was a most particular man about his appearance, especially strutting Saturdays. Polishing shoes, brushing a hat, ironing a suit, dress shirt, and tie, occupied the morning. Then his shining set of new-made, a page out of *Esquire*, set off with Sonny to bless the afternoon. First stop, The China Li Cafe, to buy two dozen cigars.

Rumours of King in pin-stripes rustles up a mob of kids. They swarm all over the steps of The Lilian, elbow their way to the windows, peer in, whisper excitedly. The door swings open and they part like the Red Sea did for Moses, watch him pass in a hush. Silent as ghosts, they close ranks at his heels and trot down the hot sidewalks after him, a pack of hunting dogs. King doesn't give them a glance.

He stops at a cluster of farmers braced against car fenders and hoods, riding their boots on bumper. Cigars all around. King's head tosses back with a stogie clenched in strong teeth, eye on the sky prophesying the weather. There's nothing the man isn't expert on, women, livestock, cards, baseball, the grain exchange. Thumb in the ribs, hand clapped on the shoulder, sly wink to the sweet young thing in the sun-dress. And behind him the farmers' kids shyly edge in. They've never seen anything like him before, these little ones that count themselves lucky if they get a suck on a Coke or a box of Lucky Elephant Popcorn once a week. Their daddies are nothing like this daddy, they squeeze a nickel until the beaver shits and pile chores on their skinny shoulders to make the point life isn't cake and ice cream, not entirely.

King tips his hat, nods and smiles, asks after the missus and the crops in this heat. *Life's a bitch. Have a cigar!* He's on the move, there's life in those legs now, he stretches them out and seems to drag everybody along with him. He bustles in and out of stores scattering money, buying articles of no earthly use, a cheap harmonica, a pen and pencil set, last Christmas's artificial mistletoe, a rubber gorilla mask, chocolates, a water pistol, all this crazy spending driving up the excitement in the children the same way heat drives up mercury in a thermometer. Down one side of Main Street and up the other, more handshakes, winks, smiles, whistles. More stores, more everything. Then all at once instead of more, there's no more. No more room in Sonny's arms for one more parcel, the last cigar gone.

The kids stand staring at him, biting their lips. King looks back at them in amazement, as if he had never laid eyes on them before. Who are they? And he turns to Sonny and asks in a loud, surprised voice, "Why, Sonny, I never knew you were so popular. Who are all your friends?"

Sonny, who hardly knows any of them from Adam because most of them are country kids, shrugs and shifts from foot to foot, awkward and embarrassed. For the others, everything hangs in the balance, like when Peter was asked whether he knew this Christ fellow. They hold their breath and their eyes flit from son to father, father to son. King's got his wallet out and is studying its insides. He looks in the wallet and looks at them, looks at them and looks in the wallet. A slow smile creases his face and he says, "Ice cream floats on Sonny! Floats on Sonny Walsh, the farmers' friend!"

That's the signal for all hell to break loose. They go stampeding up the street yelping and whooping, pushing and shoving each other in the race to get to the Chinaman's first. Ambling along in the rear comes King, lord of the manor. In The Lily he buys five dollars' worth of floats and french fries enough to keep them eating until they puke, and distributes some of that cheap treasure he collected on Main Street to his admirers. This gets the noise level somewhere close to where he requires it but not all the way to the top so he feeds a few quarters into the juke box and cuts the rug with the waitresses while Lee cooks him an order of rare steak and mushroom fried rice. The mushroom fried rice is stomach liner for what comes next. Because what comes next is one rip of a blind drunk.

It generally fell to me to escort him home after one of these twelve-hour-long escapades, tottering with whichever of his parcels he hadn't lost or given away, steering him up the darkened street to patient Elsie. I remember one night when I got him to his door and he wouldn't go in. King had something to say to me. "I make mistakes," he confessed in a thick mutter. "Sometimes I'm not sure who I am. I ain't smart and I ain't rich. But I am big. Wasn't I the biggest thing in the street today? Nobody bigger than King Walsh. Am I right or am I wrong?"

I said he was right. It was one o'clock in the morning and I had a headache.

King called. Myra had parked the car outside Putt 'N' Fun Town the other day and spied him going there. Sonny got hot to trot, laid down an ultimatum. "Act your age. Shape up or ship out," he told King. I think King's the shape he is and it's too late to change him. I don't know how this is going to end.

Nobody in the city knows King. He is not used to streets so long and wide. He's an old man and we old men grow smaller, not bigger, before we die. King prefers a street he can fill, a narrow little street where he can look out over the roofs into the distance to an admiring woman calling and waving to him. He's running after the life he had. So toll that bell in the steeple, King. Ring it, brother, make big noise. We're all of us going to be quiet a long, long time.

Man on Horseback



FOLLOWING HIS FATHER'S DEATH, Joseph Kelsey discovered, in his bereavement, a passion for horses. Joseph's passion for horses was not of the same character as the old man's had been; Joseph's was searching, secretive, concerned with lore, confined to books. It was not love. When his wife asked him what he was doing, staying up so late night after night, he said he was working on an article. Joseph was a professor of history.

The article was a lie. He was reading about horses.



A good horse sholde have three propyrtees of a man, three of a woman, three of a foxe, three of a hare and three of an asse.



Joseph was born in a poor, backward town to a couple reckoned to be one of the poorest and most backward. It was a world of outhouses, chicken coops in backyards, eyeglasses purchased from Woolworth's, bad teeth that never got fixed. On the afternoon of October 29, 1949, when his mother's water broke his father ran down the lane to get Pepper Carmichael to drive them to the hospital. Rupert Kelsey didn't own an automobile, not even a rusted collection of rattles like Pepper's.

What Rupert Kelsey owned was seven horses. Horses slipped and slid through his fingers like quicksilver. When he was flush he bought more, when funds ran low he sold off one or two. Horses came and horses went in a continual parade, bays and sorrels, blacks and greys, chestnuts and roans, pintos and piebalds. His wife was jealous of them.

There was trouble with Joseph's birth right from the start. The hospital, staffed mostly by nuns, was tiny and antiquated, as backward as the town. Rupert Kelsey sat in the waiting room for an hour, and then a sister came out and told him they had telephoned everywhere but the doctor couldn't be found. It was understood what that meant. The doctor was either drunk – not an uncommon occurrence – or was off playing poker somewhere without having left a number where he could be reached. Rupert nodded solemnly and the nun left, face as starched as her wimple.

The duty nurse behind the reception desk, a gossip, watched him closely, intrigued to see how he would take the news. He could sense her curiosity clear across the room and he was careful not to give away anything he was feeling. He had a country boy's wilful, adamant sense of what was private, the conviction that people in towns had no notion of what was their business and what wasn't.

Because this was his wife's first baby he knew that labour would likely be prolonged and hard. For three hours he sat, alternately studying the scuffed toes of his boots and the clock on the wall, his face held gravely polite against the duty nurse's inspection. The nurse was working a double shift because the woman who was to relieve her had called in at the last minute sick. She was bored and Rupert Kelsey was the only item of even mild interest in what was going to be a very long night. To the nurse he looked thirty, but seemed much older. Maybe it was the old-fashioned haircut which made his ears stand out like jug handles, maybe it was the way he shyly hid his dirty hands and cracked nails underneath the cap lying in his lap, maybe it was the bleak rawness of a face shaved with a black safety razor sharpened that morning in a water glass, maybe it was the sum of all of these things or maybe it was none of these things which lent him that air of steadfast dignity she associated with men her father

age. He appeared to have nothing to do with her generation.

No one came out from the ward to tell Rupert Kelsey how matters stood. The Kelseys were not the sort of people that those in authority felt it necessary to make reports and explanations to. When the hands of the clock swung around to eleven he found it impossible to sustain a pose of calm any longer. Rupert got abruptly to his feet and started for the entrance.

The young nurse behind the desk spoke sharply to him. "Mr. Kelsey, Mr. Kelsey, where are you going?" In her opinion this was not the way a father-to-be with a wife in the pangs of childbirth ought to behave.

"I'll be back," he said, shouldering through the door.

It was cold, unusually cold for the end of October. The little town was dark, only its main street boasted streetlamps. Scarcely a window showed a light at this hour; in the days before television arrived, people here retired early, to sleep or entertain themselves in bed.

The barn where Kelsey stabled his horses was on the other side of town, but the other side of town was less than a ten-minute walk away. Just stepping into the heavy, crowded warmth of jostling bodies and freshly dropped dung, the ammoniac reek of horse piss, the dusty smell of hay and oats, the tangle of sweat-drenched leather, made him hate that lifeless, sinister waiting room all the more.

He saddled the mare, led her into the yard, swung up on her back, and trotted through the town. The dirt roads were dry and packed and thudded crisply under the iron shoes. Like strings of firecrackers, dogs began to go off, one after another, along the streets he and his horse travelled. The mare carried her head high, neck twisted to the dogs howling out of the blackness, answering them with startled, fearful snorts. Easy and straight as a chair on a front porch, Rupert Kelsey rode her through the uproar and beyond the town limits.

It was a clear night, the sky pitilessly high, strewn faintly with bright sugary stars. Where the curtain of sky brushed the line of the horizon, poplar bluffs bristled. Beneath this cold sky Rupert Kelsey released his horse, let her fear of dogs and night bear human fear wild down the empty road, reins slack along her neck, hands knotted in the mane, braced for the headlong crash, the capsize in the darkness. Her belly groaned hollowly between his legs, her breath tore in her chest. For three miles she fled, a runaway panicked.

At the bridge, the sudden glide of water, the broken shimmer unexpectedly intersecting the road, caused the mare to shy, and as she broke stride he fought to turn her, striking back ruthlessly on the left rein, dragging her around open-mouthed like a hooked fish, swinging her back in the direction from which she had come, his heels drumming her through the turn, urging her, stretching her out flat down the road, back to the hospital.

By the time they reached the town the mare galloped on her last legs. On the planked railway crossing she stumbled, plunged, but kept her feet. Rupert whipped her the last five hundred yards to the hospital, reining her back on her haunches before the glass doors through which he could see the nurse as he had left her, at the desk. The nurse looked at him from where she sat and he looked at her. The mare trembled with exhaustion, a faint steam rising from wet flanks and neck. The nurse, finally realizing he was not about to dismount, got to her feet, came to the door, and pushed out into the night.

"Anything yet?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"The doctor come?"

She shook her head again.

He wheeled the horse around and was gone. For several moments the nurse stood straining for a glimpse of him, pink sweater draped over her shoulders, arms wrapped around herself against the

piercing cold. Everything was swallowed up in darkness but the tattoo of hooves. She turned and went inside.

Back at the barn Kelsey pulled the bridle, blanket, and saddle off the mare and flung them on a four-year-old gelding, leaving the winded horse where she stood. Once again unseen dogs gave tongue, their wavering voices lifting along the streets. He rode hard into the countryside, the taste of a cold dark wind in his mouth.

The story was a favourite of the nurse's for a long time. "Three times he rode up to the hospital and asked after his wife and then rode away again. Different horse every time. Looked drunker every time too. They usually are. Last time it was just after the sun came up, around eight in the morning that she told him she had finally delivered a boy. You know what he said? Said, 'Tell the wife I'll be up to see her as soon as I can. I got some horses to look after.' Imagine. And that woman came near dying too. It was a near thing if she'd lost any more blood."

Joseph's mother always said to him. "You, you little bastard, you wore out three horses and one woman getting born. It's got to be a record."



Wolf Calf of the Blackfoot first received horse medicine. It was given to him in a dream by a favourite horse which he had always treated respectfully and kindly. This horse appeared to him and said, "Father, I am grateful for your kindness to me. Now I give you the sacred dance of the horses which will be your secret. I give you the power to heal horses and to heal people. In times of trouble I will always be near you."

Horse Medicine Men could accomplish miracles. Not only could they cure sick horses and sick people, they could influence the outcome of races, causing horses to leave the course, buck, or refuse to run. Pursued by enemies, they would rub horse medicine on a quirt, point it at the pursuer and drop the quirt in the path of the foe's horse, causing the animal to falter.

All Horse Medicine Men recognized taboos. Rib bones and shin bones were not to be broken in the lodge of a Horse Medicine Man. No child should ride a wooden stick horse in a lodge in the presence of a Horse Medicine Man. If he did, misfortune and bad luck would befall that child.



Before a vet arrived in the district, if a horse was sick or badly injured, its owner summoned Rupert Kelsey. Usually his father took Joseph along on these visits, although the boy wished he wouldn't. When Joseph was four a stud bit him on the shoulder. His mother told him that he had screamed bloody blue murder, screamed like a stuck pig. The purple, apple-green bruise lasted for weeks and if he hadn't been wearing a heavy parka, which had blunted the horse's teeth, the damage could have been a lot more severe. Years later Joseph would suppose that the sudden crushing pain, the breath heaved on his neck and face, the mad glare of the eyes must have been the root of what, in a son of his father's, was an unnatural, shameful fear of horses. But he couldn't be sure. He had no memory of the incident. Envy of his father's courage, he did all he could to conceal and dissemble his cowardice.

Once, when Joseph was eleven, a woman telephoned his father with horse trouble. Her husband was away from home working on the rigs and his horse had hurt itself. The woman said she was afraid her husband would blame her for what had happened to the horse, accuse her of carelessness and neglect as he had a habit of doing whenever anything went wrong. This man was infamous for his ho-

ungovernable temper. His wife had been seen in the grocery store, eyes blackened, looking like a racoon. Rupert agreed to come at once to see what he could do to help the horse and, by implication, her.

He and Joseph drove out to her place and found the horse pacing a corral, a long jagged gash on its chest dangling a piece of hide shaped like an envelope flap, an animal tormented, driven half-mad by pain and relentless clouds of flies. Joseph was ready to bet his father was going to get killed trying to catch this crazy horse. To start with, it tried to escape, clambered up six feet of fence rails, grunting and pawing, toppled over on its hind quarters, and collapsed in a whirl of slashing legs. Then it scrambled to its feet and came straight at his father, squealing, wriggling, kicking, teeth bared. His father broke the charge, made the horse veer away at the last possible second by flogging it across the face and eyes with the stock whip he carried. Joseph, clinging to the fence, begged and shouted at his father to come out of there, leave that horse be, but he wouldn't listen. Around and around the corral the two went, horse and man. The dust hung in the lowering evening light like a fine, golden powder. As it settled on his father's clothes and hair it turned from gold to grey, turning him into a ghost.

At last his father lassoed the horse and snubbed him down as tight as he could to a post. Next he fashioned himself a makeshift twitch out of a bit of rope and stick and performed the dangerous sleight of hand of slipping the loop on the horse's nose and cranking it up like a tourniquet. The horse braced itself on widely splayed legs, mad eyes rolling, strong yellow teeth bared, slobber slopping over its bottom lip. But now his father had the son of a bitch, had him good. When he called Joseph to come and take the twitch, the boy came with no more protest than if God Almighty himself had ordered him. Out from behind the fence of poplar poles to keep a jug-headed man-killer squeezed into submission with a twist of hemp and dry wood. He was safe because his father was near, patiently sponging Creolin into the raw mouth of the laceration, painstakingly picking slivers and dirt from the butchered flesh. His father was there talking quietly and matter-of-factly to both horse and boy. "Now when you pull this splinter loose, look out. Get set. He's going to breathe fire. Aren't you going to breathe fire, you no-nuts son of a bitch?" Nothing could go amiss or awry with his father there, speaking so calmly.

The wound was clean, there was nothing left to do but stitch the cut. Fishing through shirt pockets his father began to swear. Somehow his needle and thread had gone missing and he would have to borrow what he needed from the woman. Joseph was to hold the horse until he got back. "He won't be going anywheres on you if you keep that twitch tight. Just keep the twitch tight," his father reiterated and was gone before the boy could manufacture an excuse why he shouldn't leave him.

Over his shoulder, Joseph watched his father amble to the house, knock, and disappear into the porch when the door was answered. He turned back to the horse. The wound was bleeding, dripping slow, fat drops of blood into the dust. It was like watching the second hand of a clock. He counted the drops, watched three hundred fall. Three hundred drops equalled five minutes. Five minutes ought to be enough time to scare up a needle and thread. He glanced nervously toward the house to see if his father was returning. There was no sign of him. The boy swayed with panic. What was keeping him? Where was his father? How long was he supposed to stand holding this horse? He imagined the sun setting, his father still missing and night falling, alone with this glassy-eyed, devil horse, both rooted to this spot of ground by a twitch. Joseph's palms were slick with sweat. He thought of the stick slipping in his hands, the sudden blur of unwinding. The unwinding and springing of the fear twisted up inside him and the fear twisted up on a stick.

He began to count the drops of blood again. He would count another three hundred before he permitted himself to look again to see if his father was coming. Five minutes more. There were flies gathering at the growing puddle of black blood thickening on the ground. There were flies on Joseph

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