

The Schoolboy

by Stephen Langford

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Prologue. The Stare of Death

The character of a horse track changes drastically by the last race, and becomes a bleak and uneven mixture of too few realized hopes and too many desperate last chances. The charged anticipation of the arriving crowd reflects their unfounded belief that on any given day they can be the big winner. This view is held by the owners, by the trainers, the jockeys, the semi-professional bettors, the broken down track bums, and the lightweight fanciers that come from both nothing and from money. But by the last race, mathematics has had its day and the grounds are littered with the fallen army of losing betting slips and shredded racing sheets. The finality of a day which began with such promise is at hand, and no one escapes this inevitability.

Andrew Keeton had watched the drama play out at this crummy second-rate track, on this humid spring day in what was the start of the 1965 Kentucky racing season, for seven races. Post time for the eighth race, the last one, was only a few minutes away. To him, however, the event was not an occasion for casual pleasure or striking it rich, or even for watching all of these curious people. He was there on a mission, but he had not yet decided what kind of mission it would turn out to be—send a message, or exact revenge? He knew that it made a difference how he did his job, either carefully precise or in the mad chaos of emotion, and under the right circumstances it could mean his own death if he undertook it carelessly.

Keeton was not careless. Today he was inconspicuously situated at an umbrellaed corner table with the dirty brick wall of the open viewing area at his back. His outfit was selected to blend into the milieu of the Kentucky horse scene, neither the snooty owner's suit nor the patched knee and elbow of the country loafer. His casual slacks and thin cotton shirt covered the fit body, and his facial features were hidden by a pair of clubmaster sunglasses and a houndstooth trilby hat.

"Another bourbon, sir?" the black waiter asked as he made the rounds of outside tables. He was big, sweaty and polite. Keeton understood the societal differences between them, the reality of how each of them was regarded and treated. The notion of this man, a Negro, serving him in this sort of venue pricked his conscience. The image of those obscene plaster lawn jockeys came to mind. Keeton himself was a native Kentuckian, but had never been able to abide any kind of bully, especially the systemic type whose power did not come from brains or effort, but from genetics. Still, the man before him had a job, and did it well. Let him alone to make a living.

"One more, please," Keeton answered. It would be his third, but he did not plan on drinking it. "Who do you like in the eighth?"

"Oh, I wouldn't presume to lecture mister on the fine art of equestrian," the waiter said, but when he leaned in to pick up Keeton's empty glass he lowered his voice. "But if I did, I'd say you couldn't go too far wrong with

Runnin' Aces—nine to one, but he's on a hot streak on a hard, fast track and the jockey is a future star. It's the biggest purse of the day, and I have a good feeling that both the jockey and the horse want to take it. I'd have just enough time to place a bet for you, sir, if you were so inclined."

Keeton smiled. "You know, Mr..."

"They call me Hoggy," the waiter said. "No mister, just Hoggy."

"You know, Hoggy, I am so inclined." Keeton pulled a money clip from his pocket and peeled off a twenty dollar bill. "Put it all on Runnin' Aces to win, and we'll split the proceeds down the middle."

"Well, sir, I'm not allowed to..."

Keeton raised his hand. "Let's cross that bridge after the race. Besides, I'll owe you for the drink and a gratuity, no matter what. We'll settle up then, okay?"

Hoggy smiled and took the bill. When he had walked off to place the bet and the drink order, Keeton focused his attention back on the man down by the track rail, who he'd been watching for nearly five races. It was his target, correctly predicted by his MI-6 liaison to be at this track, this day. It was no accident that the target was here in Kentucky—he was trying to find Keeton and kill him, after all—but neither was it an accident that Keeton was able to turn the tables and become the hunter. The CIA had successfully planted the story that Keeton needed severe recuperation after his last mission—emotional distress, it was purported—and had chosen to return to the familiar environment of his youth. The British agency had then watched the suspect and waited, who sure enough left for America under a cover identity during a presumed spring holiday to the south of France.

Lucky for me, I know your face, you bastard, Keeton thought as he stood. The horses were loaded into the starting gate and a moment later the bell rang to begin the eighth race. Hoggy returned and set the tumbler of bourbon on the table and handed Keeton the betting slip.

"Meet me here after the race," Keeton said, giving the slip back to him. "Assuming we win." Then he began making his way down toward the track, through the ever hopeful throng who'd mostly lost their money that day two dollars at a time. The target was foolishly evident in his white tweed driving cap and garishly colored checked sport jacket. The horses were just rumbling past the rail where the target was leaning in, racing sheet and pencil in hand. The race caller's voice, made tinny by the cheap speaker system, washed over them. Keeton pushed through to the first ring of spectators and threw his arm around the target. *Send a message, or revenge?*