

*Straightaway*FROM *The Antioch Review*

NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN it's a woman who calls Bark to answer his ad in the Westchester *Pennysaver*, and sometimes when we pull up to her yard in his pickup, she's outside waiting for us. Sometimes she even has something inside for us to eat, which, besides needing money, is why James and I never ask Bark if he wants our help: we just get in his truck and hope he lets us go.

On the Saturday morning he drives us past Poughkeepsie, though, no one's waiting outside. Maybe this has to do with the five hundred dollars this woman offered: she doesn't feel the need to be friendly beyond that. Or maybe she's with the junk that needs to be hauled. Anyway, Bark pulls off the country road into her driveway, which drops through her uncut lawn toward her shabby yellow house, and we all get out, Bark headed to knock on her front door.

Hey, I hear from the left-hand side of the house, and I turn but see no one. Down here, the voice calls, and there, crouched near an open crawlspace hole, is a woman about as dark as me, maybe five years older.

Over here, Bark, I shout, and Bark makes his way down the porch, then over to her, James and I lagging behind to let her know he's boss.

I took care of the rest myself, she says, and Bark kneels beside her, then pokes his head and a good half of him into the crawlspace. He stays in there for a while, making sure, I figure, that we can do what needs doing. Then he's back out, and he stands, slapping dirt off his knees.

Just that oil drum? he says.

Yeah, she says.

I thought you said there was a bunch of stuff, he says.

No, she says. Just that.

What's in it? he asks.

I have no idea, she says, but she's scratching her arm and keeps scratching it: if she's not flat-out lying, she's more than a little nervous.

Because the thing is, Bark says. I can't just take a drum like that to a dump without them asking what's inside.

Then don't take it to a dump, she says. Just, you know, get rid of it.

Bark grabs his unshaven jaw, considering. Probably he's stumped by why a sister is living this far upstate; plus it doesn't make much sense that *any* woman living in a house this shabby could have five hundred dollars, let alone give it to us to haul off a drum with nothing bad in it. It crosses my mind this woman loves some guy who's given her five hundred to get rid of the drum, some dude, maybe a white one, that she loves and cheated with — and that inside the drum is this man's wife. But all kinds of things are crossing my mind, including how I could use five hundred dollars divided by three.

How 'bout a thousand? the woman says.

Here's where all of us, including her, gaze off at her uncut lawn, the dandelions and weeds in it, some of them pretty enough to call flowers. We gaze our separate ways for a long time, letting whatever truth of what's going on sink into us while we play as if it isn't, and I feel my guts work their way higher toward my lungs, threatening to stay there if Bark agrees. But there's a lot I could do with my share of a thousand, especially since I'm used to walking away from these jobs with fifty at most. I could eat more than apples and white bread and ham. I could start saving for a truck of my own — to haul things for pay myself.

Then, to the woman, Bark says, In cash?

As soon as that drum's in your truck, she says.

Bark glances at James, who nods.

Tre? Bark asks me, and I know he's working me over with his eyes, using them to try to convince me in their I-don't-care-either-way manner, but what I'm watching is the women's feet, which are

the tiniest bit pigeon-toed. They are also perfectly still, which could mean she's no longer nervous, but my eyes, I know, are avoiding her fingers and arms. Still, the sight of those pigeon-toed feet coax me to trust her: I could stay loyal to a woman who stands like that.

Why not? I answer. I haven't, I tell myself, actually said yes, but when I look up, James is following Bark into the crawlspace, the woman checking me out.

Sure appreciate it, she says, in the flat way of someone who could do two men on the same day yet allow none of it to show on her face, but now she's scratching her collarbone — over and over she's scratching it, without one bug bite on her. There's death in that drum, I think, but with her pigeon-toed feet aimed at me, I fall even more in love.

Then she walks off, toward a stream behind her house, and it hits me that if I want my share of the thousand, I should get my ass in that crawlspace, since the actual removal of the drum might take but five minutes — and the last thing I need is Bark and James saying I don't deserve a cent. Then I realize that if I don't take a cent, I might not be guilty of any crime that's going on here, but thoughts like that help only if you can afford a lawyer who cares more than a public defender, plus I need to be in Bark's truck to get home, and even before I'm done thinking all this I'm on my hands and knees, my head brushing morning glory vines, then on its way through the square opening in the woman's cracked foundation.

It's quieter in there, and it stinks. James and Bark are on their bellies, snaking their way over damp dirt and rocks toward the drum, which lies on its side in the far corner. With the thousand in mind, I work myself toward them, trying to get a hand on the drum when they do, but Bark yells, We got it, Tre.

What are you saying? I ask.

I'm saying this is a two-man job, so back off.

You trying to cut me out of my share.

No. It's just there ain't enough room for all three of us if we want to get this thing past us.

So what do you want me to do?

Bark humps up his backside, reaches into a front pocket, pulls out his keys, tosses them toward me. Pull the truck down the driveway, he says. His hands dig dirt away from the drum. As close to the house as you can, he says.

Bark, I say. You know I can't drive.

Sure you can, he says. Just start it, put it in gear, and steer it so you don't hit nothing.

Okay, I say, though Bark's confidence in me has taken away the little I have in myself. I used to have confidence — gold confidence — but the older I get, I have less. Still, I back myself out of the crawlspace, pretend the woman isn't watching as I jog up the driveway to Bark's truck, hop inside it, start it, put it in drive, and let it roll down there. Steering is easier than I thought, but when I put on the brake, I about fly through the windshield. The woman, still near the stream, has her arms folded now, checking me out like she recognizes me from when we were in grammar school together, which, who knows, maybe we were. There's that kind of thing between us, that half-knowledge about each other we'd ruin with conversation, and I want to make love to her bad.

Now Bark and James are yanking the drum top-first through the hole in her foundation: the drum is too wide to roll out. They struggle like hungry playground kids; whatever's in that thing is dumb-heavy. Wind blows past my face, the woman now picking a weed's yellow flower from between pebbles beside the stream. It's her husband in the drum, I think. She got carried away in an argument over nothing and the thousand is all they ever saved.

Tre, Bark calls to me. Gonna help us or not?

I nod, toss him his keys, which he catches like it's the old days. I walk toward him and James, and all three of us roll the drum to the driveway, flattening a strip of knee-high grass, acting like we haul mystery drums every day. When it's time to get it onto the bed, we all take extra care to hold the top of it closed as we heave it up and lower it. Dead weight, I think. If this isn't a corpse, she would have said so.

Bark slams closed the tailgate, works his toolbox and scrap wood to make sure the drum won't move. No way are we taking it to the dumps we sometimes hit, even the unguarded one that isn't supposed to be a dump. The woman has her back to us, facing the stream. I'll never see her again, but I need to. Finally she walks toward the crawlspace hole, hooks its screen window back onto it, and heads into the house. While she's inside, James flicks a horsefly off his neck. She returns and walks toward us with her lips pursed; she's even finer-looking with sunshine on her face. She gives Bark a

handful of cash folded in half. He counts it, mostly twenties, then nods, slips it into his shirt pocket, and says, Anything else?

Nope, she says.

Any ideas about where we should take it? he says.

That's your business, she says. Anyone asks me, I never seen that drum in my life.

Right, Bark says, and I can tell by how he gets inside his truck — without shaking her hand, which he usually does with people we take junk from — that he wishes we could just roll the drum back down the lawn and give back the cash. But he starts the engine, lets it eat gas while me and James get in beside him, me in the middle. And after we back up and ease out onto the road, I notice the woman's gone — inside her house, I guess.

We're headed away from the city, I realize after Bark stops accelerating. North, it seems. Farther upstate. Two miles an hour under the speed limit, none of us making a sound. The radio's off. I think to ask Bark where we're going, but it's like the three of us have made a side deal not to talk.

And if anyone's going to break that deal, I'm guessing, it'll be James, but James doesn't say jack, and neither do Bark and I the whole time we cruise over tar-striped highways zigzagging us toward tree-covered hills. I imagine it'll take hours to reach those trees, and maybe it does, but when we're finally alongside their shadows, I don't want to stop. Behind us in the bed is, as far as I know, only one shovel, and damned if I'll be the one to use it. We pass a farmhouse, a line of crammed-together mailboxes, a boarded-up gas station where a rusted sign reminds us of when unleaded was \$1.74. Bark is scanning the bushy fields on either side of us, trying, I can tell by his grimace, to be more smart than scared.

We pass a state park with no one in the guard station. Then Bark is speeding down a straightaway. There's no one around us, from what I can tell, but no place for the drum. Then Bark brakes and pulls over. There's a hill to our right, but it's a football field away. How 'bout here? he asks.

Where, James says.

Yeah, I say. Where.

Right next to the road.

Are you high? I say.

Got any better ideas? Bark says.

Someplace more hidden, I say. I mean, with trees.

You're high, he says. The last thing we need is someone up here seeing three brothers walking out of some woods. They'll follow the truck. They'll read my license plate. We get out now — without any cars passing us — and roll it out quick and take off, there's no way anyone can trace anything to us.

Then let's do it, James says. Fast, he says, and he's out his door, and Bark is out his, and again I tell myself I'm with them anyway, so I might as well make sure I get paid. James can't lower the tailgate, so Bark slaps away his hand and lowers it himself, and they roll out the drum, and I do what I can to help, though all I manage is to get my hands on the thing two seconds before they drop it on the weedy emergency lane. I try to roll it into red bushes twenty feet from the gravel, but Bark is running back inside the truck, then James too, and the drum feels heavier than it was and a rock is in the way — and behind me on the highway, a car is coming. I think to run, then undo my fly as if I'm about to piss, using this as an excuse to turn my face as the car passes, honking its horn.

It doesn't stop, though. It's two dressed-up white women, speeding to wherever. When I get back in the truck, Bark says, What you do that for?

To take their eyes off the drum, I say.

That was *stupid*, James says.

I don't think so, I say.

He might be right, Bark tells James, and Bark waits until the car, shrinking ahead of us down that straightaway, is out of sight. Then he glances behind us, U-turns, and takes off in the direction we came from, and now, with the drum gone, James starts talking as if he has to make up for everything we all three didn't say since we left the woman's house, asking why we did it, asking why *he* did it, saying we should have thought it over, should have discussed it in the privacy we had to ourselves in the crawlspace — one of us, he says, should have put a foot down to keep all of us from losing our heads. We could have said no! he shouts. We could have said no at *any* time. We were greedy. We did it for bad money. Money that big is always evil. Then he goes on about how he hates being poor, hates the *forever* of it — it's like we were all born into these rubber bags we can't punch our way out of. There's no *light* in his life, he

says. Not even in summer. Never was. He never should have hung around us, even in high school. He should have listened to his mother when, after we won state, she said we were bad influences, God rest her soul.

But that's as close as he gets to talking about the death in the drum, and his carefulness about that promises me there was death in there hands down, even though I've been waiting for him to zip it so I could say that, for all we know, we just dumped off a crammed bunch of laundry that got moldy after the stream rose and flooded the woman's house. There's a million other things besides a person that could be in a drum was what I convinced myself while James went off like that, but now that he's done, that million feels like a million too many.

Then a word of my own won't leave my mind: fingerprints. Bark turns on the radio and presses SCAN, but it keeps coming back to this station that plays lite songs for white folks. He lets it play, though, and the news comes on, and I listen expecting the dude to report a dead body found in a drum even though I know that's impossible so soon. After the news ends, Bark snaps off the radio, and I imagine he's thinking the same thing I am: for the rest of our lives, we won't but will want to hear any news on any radio or watch it on TV.

And I don't need to ask him if this thought's on his mind right now, because a glance from him, as we roll toward the city, tells me. That's how it was in both our championship seasons: all he and I needed was eye contact to know if I should lob the ball down to him or fake away and come back with a bounce-pass or pull up with a jumper he was getting set to rebound. We'd never say a word, never even nod. We were tight like that, and now we're still that tight, but I don't like where our tightness has taken us. James never had that unspoken vibe with us; in fact, he was always yakking at us and everyone on the court, refs included, even at the families in the stands. I used to think this was because he had the least talent of our starting five, but anyway since then he's used talk as a weapon in just about every situation he finds himself in: keeping the threat of it to himself at times, letting the world have it when he's backed into a corner. In a way it was good he talked so much when we played ball — it hid that eye contact Bark and I used — but now he just sits. And what makes me worry even more is that it's

Bark who finally speaks up, and, worse, what he says is: I say we go to Mississippi.

Mississippi, I say.

Ditch the truck in Virginia or something, take a bus the rest of the way, start all over down there.

Hang on, man, I say. For one thing, where would we stay?

We'll rent. Like we do now.

With a thousand dollars?

It's not like anything's keeping us in New York, he says. None of us has a woman, none of us has a job other than to haul junk. Maybe this never crossed your mind, Tre, but you can haul junk for cash just about anywhere.

But we'll go through the thousand like that, James says with a snap of his fingers. We got gas to buy, bus tickets, food — and you don't just walk into a new town and start *living*, in an apartment and all, without a good pile of cash.

True, Bark says.

Maybe ten miles pass while the three of us sit like strangers on an F-train. Then, just by Bark's suddenly stiff posture, I know what he's got in mind. He's not just heading to the city; he's heading to Belmont Park, to try to bet our thousand into more.

Bark, tell me we're not going to Belmont, I say.

Why not? he says, and I expect James to start lecturing, but he doesn't.

Well, I'm not going, I say.

Where you gonna go? Bark says. Back to that stinkin' apartment to wait for the cops?

They ain't gonna find me.

Well, they ain't gonna find *me*, Bark says. Because I'll be in Mississippi. With a helluva lot more cash than I have now.

You're saying I don't get my share if I don't go to the track? I ask.

No, Bark says. You'll get yours.

But it hits me he's already planning to take a chunk from my third for gas and wear-and-tear on his truck, which he does now and then — and which is fair, even though it seems unfair because he does it only when he wants cash to bet on horses. So now I'm looking at \$300, maybe even only \$275, and as many groceries as \$275 might buy me, it feels like it's already nothing no matter whose pocket it winds up in, or where. Plus if Bark does leave for

Mississippi, James and I will need to make up for his share of the rent in the apartment — and damned if I'll live with some stranger.

And what if he wins? I think. Bark usually doesn't win, but, almost always, he comes close. His problem isn't that he doesn't know horses; fact is, in just about every race I've seen when I've gone to the track with him, he pretty much knows which horse will finish first. His problem is he lives for the big payoff, so he bets trifectas — which means he has to pick first, second, and third in the exact order — and it's usually third place, or sometimes only the exactness, that gets him.

I'll take you home, Tre, he says now. But on the way there, just hear out my plan.

He turns on the radio, turns it off.

We don't bet every race, he says. We bet one. And before we do, we study all the races to see which one's best.

For the thousand, I say.

Right, he says.

We put it *all* on one race? James says.

Bark nods. You guys are the ones saying we need more cash to move. *You* got any ideas about how we can make a pile in a hurry? I mean, legally?

Here's where I most wish James would go off on another yakking streak — about all sorts of money-making ideas that never entered my mind — but again he keeps still. And all I can think about when it comes to big, fast money is what would have happened if I hadn't messed up my knee in the semifinals the first year we won state. Yeah, we won state anyway, and yeah, everyone on the team propped me over their heads as we left the court, and, yeah, the ligament healed in time for us to win state again our senior year, but everyone who scouted us that year saw my ugly-ass knee brace, saw how I'd lost a half a second off my first step to the hoop, and even though I'd compensated my senior year by improving my jumper and passing game, everyone knew my burst of speed was why I'd gotten thirty-four letters of interest from pro and college scouts my junior year — and that, for all the points and assists I'd racked up, my best bursts of speed were behind me.

So we sit like that, all three of us, I imagine, remembering those days, as Bark takes us farther down toward the city, then pulls left onto the Sprain Brook, then exits onto the Cross County Parkway.

The greens of the trees and bushes and fields around us are too soon replaced by faster traffic and concrete, reminding us we live in the Bronx. And it's not Mississippi or the death in the drum or the hope of winning a pile of cash that changes my mind about whether I'll go along with Bark's plan; it's this appearance of the Bronx that does it. That feeling of being squeezed in. That feeling of knowing you are one of thousands, if not millions, of brothers caged into a future in which you will finally do something no-holds-barred-stupid. There's that stretch of moments, after we pay the toll for the Throg's Neck Bridge and stay just under the limit while we rise, when you see the blue water and yachts on either side and think the good life could happen to at least a few people who live where you do, but then the water is behind us and a Mercedes cuts us off as we signal to make the Hutch, and then there's the construction and the slow-downs, and you sit, itching to move forward, knowing that Belmont is, after all, a park with burgers and picnic tables and tents that sell beer. Fuck it, you think. We're almost there.

And then we are there, on Belmont's grounds, me and Bark and James, both of them, in hazier sunshine than we came from, looking older than I thought we were. Bark buys a program, the thousand again dented as it was to pay our parking and entry fees, and sits on a painted-green bench near where they bring the horses to saddle and pet them before they bust ass out on the track. They already ran the first two races, he says, a little pissed, and he slouches and studies away while James and I sit on either side of him like we're shielding his head from the thoughts of the white chumps walking past — whose clothes say they know far less about horses than they should. All we need, I think, is for Bark to find that one, best race. And to concentrate enough to pick the three horses in the right order. The death in the drum means pressure, I know, but Bark, I remember, played his best under pressure. In fact, *lack* of pressure was why he never made the pros or a college team either: in the high school games we knew we'd win, which was most of them, he could never get himself to try all that hard, and, if you believed our coach, word got out he was lazy. But in those few big games, the major-pressure ones, he always showed up to leave sweat on the court, and even if his shot was off or he dragged down fast breaks from being out of shape, he did the kinds of things that

make championships, like elbowing the wind out of the other team's star when the refs weren't looking, or giving a soft high-five just before I'd toe the line for a free throw.

Now he's walking us to another green bench — beside the homestretch of the track. Again James and I sit up against his shoulders. He's flipping pages in his program, back and forth from Race 4 to Race 6. He's got it down to those two, he's told me without even clearing his throat. I want Race 4 so we'll know sooner if we've won or not, but I don't want to mess with what all those numbers are teaching him. He holds Race 6 closer to his face. He sighs. I look off around us.

We'll do it in the fourth, he says.

You know which horses? James asks.

The three-horse for sure. And the one. It's just a matter of whether we go with the four, seven, or nine after that.

That don't exactly sound solid, James says.

Just being straight with you, Bark says. What's left of the races today are hard as shit to pick.

Can we just go with the three and one to finish first and second? I ask.

That would be an exacta, Bark says. And *everyone's* gonna box the three-one exacta. Which means it'll hardly pay.

We can't take the three and the one with all three of those other ones you like? I ask. I mean, in trifectas?

That would be three different bets, Bark says. Meaning we'd bet only three-hundred-some on each. Which again means a lower payoff.

But we'd be more likely to win.

Bark returns to studying, but I'd guess he's also considering what I've said. Then I'm sure he's trying to figure how much each of those three trifectas could pay, but then I'm not sure of anything.

How much do we need? he asks.

Who knows? James says. But you'd have to think five or six grand would be cool.

And here's where I both believe we'll win but also wish we wouldn't. I wish we could just get in the truck and go home. I want to start the day over. I want to go back in time even before that, and meet the pigeon-toed woman before whatever happened in her life that forced her to call Bark. I want to make love to her back then, night after night, so often and well, the drum will stay empty.

But it's not back then. It's today, and now Race 3 is running, without Bark betting a penny on it, which reminds me we're here for serious business despite the white college boys beside us drinking beer, all of them hooting as the six-horse pulls ahead.

Bark looks up as the six wins easily. He glances at the odds board and says, Twenty-five to one. He hunches over to reread the program.

You know what? James says.

Shut up, I say. Let the man think.

You're right, James says.

Seagulls almost land on the lawn inside the track, then swoop off. They're headed north, toward the drum. That six-horse was headed north, toward the drum. Wind blows past the three of us: north, toward the drum.

The more I look at this, Bark says, the more I can see *any* horse finishing up with the one and the three. And the way the crooks here fix these races, any horse could *beat* the one and the three.

So what do we do? I ask.

Key the one and the three with every other horse in the race.

Which means what? James asks.

Which means if the one and the three finish first, second, or third, we collect.

Sounds good, James says.

But they both have to finish in the top three.

Sounds tough, I say.

It's as easy as I can make it, Bark says.

How much would we win? I ask.

Bark shrugs. Anywhere from double our money to a ton.

But like you say, what good is double our money?

Tre, Bark says. We gotta leave here with *something*.

Which tells me that, today, he's lost faith in horses. If it were yesterday, or any day before we moved that drum, he'd have enough faith for the three of us. But it's today. It doesn't matter that he's got more cash in his pocket than he's ever had at the track: today is today.

We all three sit. The horses walk onto the track, a jockey on each. Then Bark stands and says, Let's do it, and James and I follow him under the grandstand to the betting windows, where we wait in a short but slow line. Finally Bark leans in close to our teller, an old white lady. He talks so quietly, she needs to lean too, and then he

pulls out the cash and hands it over for a ticket he reads even after his feet begin to shuffle off.

Gentlemen! the teller shouts. Your change? She's holding three twenties, and James jogs back to her, takes them, gives one apiece to me and Bark, then stuffs the third in his pocket, and as we walk back out toward the homestretch, it hits me I might have done something for a twenty I'd never do again for all the money in the world.

Bark veers left, toward the bench near the homestretch. Shouldn't we watch by the finish line? James asks, but Bark keeps on. James stands still, knees locked, yakking about how what we'd see from that bench won't matter, about how he wants to eyewitness the very end, about how, if all of us shout enough near the finish line, we could affect whether we win or lose.

Go ahead and shout, Bark says. I'm gonna watch from here.

James huffs off, leaving me to decide who to watch with. I don't follow him since the last thing I need is the sound of his voice. I don't sit beside Bark since I'm pissed he's a reason I went upstate. I stand where I am, partway between Bark and the finish line: in front of the odds board beyond the dirt where they'll run. It all of a sudden doesn't mean shit that the three of us won state twice together, lived together ever since, might end up together in Mississippi for the rest of our lives: we're all strung out along that wire fence like cousins who never met, each of us as alone as the old drunk beside me, all of us as stuck inside ourselves as whoever's rotting in that drum.

And we stay like that until the horses are in the gate. I glance over at Bark, who nods. Then I see that the horses are running, already on their way down the backstretch. Because of their distance I can't tell if we're winning, and then, because of the odds board, I can't see them at all. I hear names being called, but to us it's all about the one and three. Then I see every horse out there bunched into a pack, and as they reach the far turn, what looks like a three is in second. Then they're in their best full sprints toward and past Bark. Then they're passing me, getting whipped, with the three for sure in front. But the rest of them are gaining — or maybe they're not. The three might be fading, and a woman in the grandstand screams, and then I watch the rear ends of ten horses, and I haven't seen the one at all.

James is still beside the finish line, pointing but not yelling. Bark, with his arms at his sides, leans back against his bench. Then both of them are walking toward me, as if I'm in charge.

Well? Bark asks James.

I couldn't tell, James says. They were all bunched together.

Bark shrugs, his eyes aimed at the odds board, on the three boxes beside WIN, PLACE, and SHOW. A lit-up ten is in the WIN box, the other two boxes unlit.

We were right to key them with every other horse, Bark says. *Nobody* would have guessed the ten.

Which means a big payoff? I ask.

Bark nods. If we win.

Then, in the place-box, I see the lit-up number one. Here we go, James says, and the whole board goes dark, blinks twice, then lights up. The ten is still up over the one, the show-box still empty.

The three was toward the front, I say. Wasn't it?

It was when they passed me, Bark says. And it was *supposed* to stay up there.

He won't look at James, so I do.

Well, James? I say. Did the three hold on?

It might have, he says. But I'm telling you, man: from where I was standing, I really couldn't see.

Sonofabitch, Bark says, and I look at the board, where a clear-as-dawn number is now in the show-box: three.

It's not official, Bark says. And when it is, pretend it isn't. The last thing we need is someone following us out to the parking lot.

Let's get in line, I say. Let's get our cash and get out of here.

Just chill, Bark says, but then he's heading back under the grandstand, and James and I follow.

The three held on, James says, and he grabs my wrist.

Yeah, I say. We did it.