

Foreword

Charles Johnson

After reading philosopher Michael Boylan's entertaining and thought-provoking philosophical narrative, *The Extinction of Desire*, I found myself thinking of the real-life morality tale of Andrew Jackson Whittaker Jr., a 57-year-old native of Charleston, West Virginia, who in 2004 won the largest undivided lottery in the history of the United States: a Powerball jackpot worth \$314 million. This good fortune, or so some claimed, was the American Dream of material prosperity come true, and Whittaker donated \$20 million of his new-found wealth to various charities. But within two years this dream of winning "the cosmic lotto" and finding "a way to beat one's karma," as Boylan so beautifully describes the addiction to betting, transformed into a terrifying modern-day Buddhist parable. In August 2003, a strip club owner and his girlfriend were charged with drugging Whittaker and stealing from his SUV a briefcase containing \$545,000 in cash and checks. In March of the next year, his SUV was broken into again, and a thief stole \$100 in a bank bag. His office was broken into – on that occasion \$2,000 was taken. Then his home was broken into on the day the dead body of an 18-year-old boy, a friend of his granddaughter Brandi Lasha Bragg, was discovered on the premises. (Some claimed she supplied the boy with drugs purchased with money Whittaker gave her.) By March of 2006, his granddaughter was missing. Two years earlier, an employee at a

race track and casino alleged that Whittaker sexually assaulted her. By December of 2004, he had been arrested twice for drunken driving and ordered to enter rehab for a 28-day period. He also faced charges for attacking a bar manager. In 2006, Whittaker's wife Jewel told the *Charleston Gazette* that, "I wish all of this had never happened. I wish I would have torn the ticket up."

Perhaps these days Jack Whittaker is pondering the question asked in the opening sentence of *The Extinction of Desire*, "What would you do if you suddenly became rich?" In the case of this novel's protagonist, Michael O'Meara, a Fairview High School teacher in Bethesda, Maryland, the sudden windfall involved – \$1 million received after a freak accident wipes out his family, leaving him the only heir – is miniscule compared to Whittaker's, but that seven-figure sum is enough to trigger a destabilizing "chain reaction" in which, he says, "I found myself confronted with myself. And I wasn't really prepared for that." In other words, he must critically examine his "worldview," a key concept in Boylan's writings as a professional philosopher. In that analytic context, he says of the Personal Worldview Imperative that, "All people must develop a single comprehensive and internally coherent worldview that is good and that we strive to act out in our daily lives." The plot and broad cast of characters in *The Extinction of Desire* pressure O'Meara to wonder, "Was it my own tattered worldview that was ready for collapse?" The answer is yes, but his achieving a new one, far from taking place in a comfortable classroom setting, can only be arrived at through an outer and inner journey into what phenomenologists have referred to as the *Lebenswelt* ("Life-world"), of unpredictably dangerous real people, real things, and real places.

For in the best philosophical fiction, ideas do not float disembodied far above human experience in a remote (or immanent) Platonic realm of forms, abstracted from what Ch'an (Zen) Buddhists would call the everydayness of life. On the contrary: engaging philosophical fiction returns intellectual questions to their place of origin, which is the muck and mud and sweaty

messiness, the ambiguity of lived experience so overrich in meaning prior to our truncating explanations and the Procrustean beds of our theories. Then the novelist dramatizes these experiences and ideas captured in their “wild being” (as philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty once put it) in a process that has epistemological importance insofar as new, hitherto unseen or concealed profiles (meanings) of the phenomenon may be revealed – a disclosure not unlike the revelation O’Meara encounters in the story about Zen Buddhist nun Chiyono when the bottom falls out of her old pail bound with bamboo. Our perception or way of seeing is forever changed. Thus, as a *dramatic* narrative, a well-crafted philosophical novel (or any novel) is never a series of dry lectures, or academic dialogues. Characters do not sit in a parlor sipping Chardonnay and dispassionately discussing ideas. They must *live* them, and for high stakes. They must dramatically face what Sartre called “the agony of choice.” Ideas must be tabernacled in the rich possibilities of character and event. And when this is masterfully accomplished, a reader is enriched by the *re*-incarnation of ideas, by imaginative storytelling giving abstractions flesh and palpability.

The experiential topography of Michael O’Meara’s Life-world is presented early in the story by a nameless, gum-chewing girl at Fairview High eager to marry a rich Georgetown law student. But, she says, “I won’t stay married to him. Oh no. I’m too smart for that. I’ll divorce him and take half his money . . . To have *me* it’s going to *cost* him.” Although probably a poor student academically, this young gold-digger understands the “ethos centered around the acquisition of *things*,” which is universally grounded in the basic goods required for human action – food, clothing, shelter, and protection from bodily harm. Most likely, she is not a “bad” person, but the urge to not only survive but also prosper – as a tactic for dealing with everyone’s dread of poverty and death – leads to a Hobbesian state that exacerbates ruthless competition and inequality: a social realm we know all too well today because many residents of non-Western nations live on a dollar

a day (or less), and here in America, which consumes the lion's share of the world's resources, citizens are bombarded with 3,000 product messages a day (according to Brad Adgate, senior vice-president of the New York branding firm Horizon Media) that enflame and condition (if not actually create) an endless amount of thirst for (*trishna* in Sanskrit) and attachment to *things*. That ethos has also been internalized by O'Meara's ex-wife Sara. A woman who reduces herself and others to a state of thinghood, and yearns to "be with the 'important' people and collect desirable acquaintances so they might be displayed for all to see," she demands more alimony and child support (for children from her earlier marriage) after learning of Michael's inheritance. Like the tiger raised as a grass-eating goat in the novel's prologue, almost everyone in O'Meara's world – from his swindling college friend Bernie to the "honest crook" Mookie – discovers their "true nature" is, if not predatory, then certainly dominated by the acquisitive profit-motive, by "overreaching for what you don't have." That, for Hobbes, is the primary sin, as the protagonist learns late in the story. And this sin appears in Boylan's philosophy as the violation of two requirements for any civilized society: namely, "the assurance that those you interact with are not lying to promote their own interests," and "the assurance that those you interact with will recognize your human dignity and not exploit you as a means only."

Yet O'Meara, the poor scholar, is still something of a grass-grazing goat when the novel begins, and therefore he is at a disadvantage in this loveless realm of greed, conspicuous consumption, and selfishness. He is still grieving for his dead father, and longing for his "quasi fiancée" Aisling, his Beatrice, who has left her teaching post at Fairview High to complete her doctorate at the University of London. All in all, O'Meara is charmingly quirky in his morality, believing that, "You can't be perfect. You shouldn't even try to be perfect . . . The Turkish rug makers used to have a tradition of putting a flaw in each of their rugs . . . To show to God that they did not aspire to perfection."

The very thought would have been an instance of pride.” In a social world of movers and shakers, O’Meara – so lacking in vanity, so flawed – is usually the “shaken,” a man lacking “inner fire. . . . Reactive and not proactive” was his style. However, once wealth comes, he dabbles in a received, unearned worldview, which produces moral dilemmas that only deepen his state of disequilibrium.

Those scenes in *The Extinction of Desire* when O’Meara tries his best to be a winner and stop being “screwed, blued, and tattooed” by others, are deliciously ironic moments of comedy. Aware that Bernie has invested his windfall in a shady operation called Capital Ventures in “a Ponzi fraud with new monies used to cover old debts,” O’Meara’s only recourse is to correct a deceit with a deceit of his own by taking out a loan from a subsidiary of Capital Ventures and *not* repaying it. He toys with purchasing luxury items such as an imitation Patek Philippe watch, feeling, “I would not be honest if I didn’t . . . find *something* attractive about these baubles. But what was it? How strong was its force? Would it win me over, too?” For a time, he acquires a BMW and a three-leveled “behemoth” of a house, but eventually this flirtation with the hedonistic fantasy of a “pampered life” abruptly ends when O’Meara finds himself thrown into a German jail.

There, he encounters cellmates who represent three of the classic “Four Signs” of impermanence and change – old age, sickness, and death – that all life will inevitably experience. That transitoriness includes thoughts as well as things, and is summarized in the terse Pali formulation *anicca dukkha anatta* (“All things are transitory; there is suffering; and there is no enduring self”). According to legend, these signs of the brevity (*anicca*) and ontological emptiness (*shunyata*) of all things led Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama to abandon the pleasure palace of his father to pursue spiritual awakening. No matter how wealthy or famous people may become, O’Meara sees, these three signs will spoil their ephemeral pleasures (*dukkha*) and heaped-up possessions (or, as a friend of mine puts it, “You’ve never seen a hearse car-

rying luggage, have you?”), and they will, if they are observant, appreciate how in a world where all things are mutually dependent and interconnected (*pratitya samutpada*), the idea of an independent, separate, enduring self or individuality is simply an illusion (*anatta*).

In that jail cell, O’Meara does not see the fourth sign, a wise and holy man whose tranquility suggested to young Siddhartha that perhaps there might be a path one could pursue to achieve release from the suffering caused by the first three conditions. (For one of his epigraphs, Boylan recites that canonical Buddhist blueprint or path for enlightenment and liberation called the “Four Noble Truths,” the last of these truths being that liberation is realized by following “The Eight-Fold Path,” or *Arya Ash-tanga Marga*.) The reason for that omission is because during O’Meara’s journey he has already come to know two important avatars ready to assist his developing a new worldview. The first is his priest, Father Mac, a man who appreciates the life of the senses without becoming lost in it. “Quality things in life that give us pleasure should not be rejected out of hand,” he says. “The Lord gave us whiskey and fine watches and other trinkets to satisfy our longing for perfection which is only understood in the abstract through God . . . it’s not the trinkets themselves that are troublesome, but our attitudes about them.” In other words, desire and attachment to them make us their slaves.

His second guru is Aisling, a woman of such idealism and integrity that O’Meara remembers her risking her job when their department chair at Fairview High tried to pressure her into passing a failing student because he had a rich, influential father. “I don’t care if his father is president of the world,” she says. “It has nothing to do with my judging his son’s work . . . I stand by my decision.” It is, therefore, logical that *The Extinction of Desire*, in addition to being a spirited philosophical odyssey, is also the love story of O’Meara and Aisling. She never tried to “remake me,” he says, and her balance and clarity “brought out the best in me.” One of the notable accomplishments of Boylan’s novel

lies in its dramatizing the timeless truth that after awakening (or *nirvana*, which literally means “to blow out” the illusory sense of self or ego) all that remains is a life – and social relations – based on joy, thanksgiving, and love. In the Buddhist tradition this is known as the attitude of *metta* (loving-kindness) toward all sentient beings. Such wisdom is obviously not exclusive to any one culture, Eastern or Western, but rather is – to paraphrase William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech – the treasure that awaits all of us when the human heart is no longer in conflict with itself, when the secular and sacred are experienced as one, and when objects and others again radiate a sense of the holy. That, I believe, is a conclusion with which the best novelists and philosophers can agree.

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Prologue: An Ancient Fable

His mother died soon after he was born. Somehow he survived. The tiger cub was found by a herd of mountain goats. They took him in and raised him as a goat.

At first it was very hard for him. He had to learn to eat grass with his sharp teeth. His teeth tore at the blades of grass and were not efficient. Soon, however, he ate grass just like the goats. He became quiet and peaceful in his soul as he discovered his bodhi nature.

Then one day he encountered a group of tigers roaming the mountains. They took one look at him and laughed. "What is a tiger doing eating nothing but grass! This is not what tigers are meant to do! Come with us and we will reveal to you your true nature." And so he went.

After a short while the group of tigers came upon a cow wandering at the foot of a mountain. The tigers killed the cow and brought some meat over to the tiger cub. "Here, this is what tigers eat!"

So he ate. The blood and warm flesh made his head spin. Deep inside him something stirred. From some unknown place within came strength. He roared.

The other tigers smiled in delight. "You see. What you were *before* was not your true self. You were duped. Now you have discovered your true nature."

The young tiger became aggressive and thirsty for more fresh meat. He pawed the ground, looked to the west, and eagerly awaited the next kill.

Part One

Chapter One

What would you do if you suddenly became rich?

I'll tell you what I did. It may interest you. You see, I was a high school teacher (or *am* a high school teacher – I'm not sure it ever leaves your blood). I was teaching history at the time, a nebulous discipline that gets civics, geography, psychology, and whatever else dumped into it. I suppose this means history either is the all-encompassing discipline or is nothing whatsoever and so demands continual supplement. But I'm getting away from "the event."

The facts are these. My uncle Will's wife's parents were celebrating their golden wedding anniversary near West Palm Beach, Florida, when a plane crashed into their festivities and killed the lot of them. I wasn't there. I had to work, although no one would have expected me to be at the party. Even my dad had considered skipping it (since going to one's brother's wife's family's get-together is, by any estimation, a bit outlandish). But you see the Tristys were short on family members of their own and so had to import some. My dad humored his baby brother, and Uncle Dick, the eldest, tagged along too.

So there it was: eight people wiped out in a flaming instant, including my father and his two brothers. No heirs except me. It happened on April 1, 1989. No joke. Almost a year and a half later, what with estates, life insurance, and triple indemnity, I was

confronted with an item that would change my life: a check for one million dollars.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "A million dollars isn't what it used to be." It is true that in 1960 there were only a few thousand millionaires in the whole country, and now they seem to be as common as cute expressions on T-shirts. But a million dollars is still a lot of money. Or so my friends keep telling me.

"Naturally, you'll let me manage it for you," said Bernie.

"Naturally," I echoed without thinking. Bernie had volunteered to handle my finances. We'd both gone to Pembroke College in Minnesota and now found ourselves living in the Washington, DC, area (albeit he was in a big house near Chevy Chase Circle, and I was in a one-bedroom apartment a few blocks from school).

Bernie was a "take charge" guy. "There's not a moment to lose," he said. "I'll draw up some papers. Now, let's see when I can get them to you. We have a big hearing at the Labor Department tomorrow, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait until Wednesday – unless that's too late. We could meet after work around seven-thirty."

"Wednesday is fine. Thursday is fine. Really, Bernie, there's no rush."

"That's where you're wrong, old salt."

When he wasn't calling me "old salt," Bernie called me "Mike" even though I had told him I preferred "Michael." All my friends call me Michael. Nobody calls me Mike – except if you count Sara. But I'd rather not count her.

"There are taxes and the investment objectives to discuss. You can't accept such a large sum of money responsibly without a plan."

"Right, Bernie."

Bernie was bursting from his vest. His large body reminded me of Father McGinnis, how his belly stuck out like a balloon from the lower abdomen. The difference was that Bernie culti-

vated his rotund figure to display contented “good living” (which meant “rich living”).

Bernie nodded his head and smiled while shuffling papers back into the “file” he’d created for my case. His smile changed his entire face – from the dimples around his eyes to the tautness under his chin. I couldn’t help thinking at that moment of how he was when we were at college. He wore his hair long (as everyone did then) and sported a Fu Manchu mustache, which gave him a definite counterculture air. That mustache was his only social link.

Bernie’s college-age warm smile was now a taut, knowing grimace. His youthful baby face had been replaced by a topography studded with growths of various elevations. Now he wore his hair medium short and combed straight back, and his clean-shaven visage sometimes reminded me of a Mafia boss.

We shook hands. Bernie’s head was still nodding.

What amazed me was how fast the news spread. I hadn’t told anyone but Bernie. People at work learned about my father’s death when I took time off for the funeral. But nothing was said about the inheritance. Who’d think about that at a funeral?

Well, maybe they do. I did, to the extent that I knew I was my father’s only heir. My mom died twenty-three years ago, and my brother was a statistic of Vietnam. I knew I’d get the family pictures and whatever was in the bank account – much as I knew that every so often I had to clean the house. It was necessary for the order of things.

But I’m not very good with money. I readily admit that, every month, my paycheck does not cover my expenses. I’m always about a hundred short. (And that’s in a good month!) If I didn’t get extra bucks for coaching track and cross-country, or the occasional income from moonlighting at the hardware store as a clerk, I wouldn’t be able to pay my bills.

“Oh Michael!” The voice was distinctly Angie’s. She has one of those voices that is in between pitches so that you hear it wherever you are.

I turned around and saw her hurrying toward me across the campus. She was managing a load of books and student papers in one arm and tugging at her overstretched vintage dark-brown v-neck sweater with the other – so she wouldn't bounce out. Above her the trees had turned a golden yellow. Soon the leaves would fall. I stopped and watched her approach. Her class was in the other direction.

"I just heard the news," she said when she reached me.

I didn't get it. Angie was always "hearing the news." She had a way of altering her bony nose so that it might fit into everyone's affairs.

"You're rich."

"Rich?"

"Come on. Don't deny it."

I smiled.

"When are you going to quit?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Quit. Finito. Say 'bye-bye.'"

My lips tightened. I tried turning away. Angie grabbed my arm with her free hand. The tight grip relaxed and transformed itself into gentle stroking. She moved close to me so that my knee was touching her thigh. "You know, now that Ash is away . . ." The bell rang for class.

I opened my mouth but didn't say anything. I couldn't look her in the eye. "I gotta go." It was time for World Civilization.

Maybe it was my imagination, but I began to think that my students were treating me differently, too. It was as if I were now somehow important. On a par with *them*.

Fairview High School students live in a world of money. When you go to the parking lot, it isn't hard to tell students' cars from faculty's. The former are new, shining, and upscale. The latter are smaller, older, and out of fashion. This is not the way I remember it, growing up in Evanston, Illinois. Most students didn't have cars, and those who did drove "handy-man specials."

You can imagine how hard it is to motivate students who know that, no matter how they do in school, a nice job will be waiting for them via mommy and daddy's influence. College tuition is not an issue for them, nor is that down payment on a first house. Students like mine sit back in their chairs and dare you to shake them out of their complacency. This attitude is so pervasive that the faculty have nicknamed Fairview "Laissez Faire," which somehow became "Lazy Fair." When I contrast Fairview with King High School, where I did my student teaching . . . well, the point is, I accepted a job *here*. No one twisted my arm.

When I got home after school that day, the phone was ringing. I ran to get it, dropping my bag of groceries in the process. Big mistake. It was Sara.

"I just heard the news."

"What news?"

"Now don't be coy with me, Mike."

No one was ever coy with Sara. "What do you want, Sara?"

"Is that any way to talk to your wife?"

"You're not my wife." As I talked I lifted an empty Coke can off a chair so I could sit down.

"Ah, what a difference a year makes."

"What a difference your moving in with Buddy made." I tried my luck shooting the empty can across the room into the waste bin. I missed it. It would have been a three-point play had it gone in, but alas, it took its place beside my other failures. Basketball was never my sport.

"Now, now. That's old news."

"Does that mean you're dumping Buddy?"

Sara laughed. It was part of her repertoire. "You're trying to change the subject, Mike."

"And what subject is that?"

"Your newly acquired wealth."

"What happened? Did it get published on the front page of the *Post* or something?"

“I know you would like to have kept it quiet.”

“What do you want, Sara?”

“For myself? Nothing. For the children . . . you know I have to look out for their welfare.”

“Your children. Not mine. By your first marriage, remember? Why don’t you call Lance if you need some more dough? I’m already sending you monthly checks.”

The laugh was turned on again. “Let’s be serious, Mike. You know your payments were fixed upon the assumption of your having a teacher’s salary.”

“Which is lower than your salary at the Treasury Department and a fraction of Buddy’s bucks as a so-called real estate developer.”

“We’re going backward again.”

“No. *You* are. If you’d had the decency to marry Buddy, I’d be off the hook for supporting Lance’s kids. This whole set-up stinks, and if you think –”

“It’s not what *I* think that matters, Mike. It’s what the court thinks. Now, if you want to go back to court . . .”

“Good-bye, Sara.”

“Not so fast –”

Click. Sara was gone.

I disconnected the phone and then set about picking the groceries up off the floor. In theory, my postage-stamp one-bedroom makes straightening up a breeze. I was almost done when Mookie walked in.

“Yo, man.”

Startled, I knocked over the bag of groceries again with my knee. Mookie smiled. He had an infectious smile that made his smooth, olive, Vietnamese skin seem to glow. For a moment he stood there watching me scramble about on all fours.

“What are you doing down on the floor?” he asked.

“Searching for my long-lost aunt.”

Mookie followed me into the kitchenette carrying an apple I’d failed to retrieve. He rubbed it once on the side of his face and began chomping away.

“Want some dinner, Mookie?”

“Dinner? No. I ate lunch. No time for dinner. Besides, I need a favor.”

What? Not Mookie, too. As a neighbor in my building, he was totally outside the network of my friends and acquaintances. How had he found out about my inheritance?

“What’s the favor?”

“I need some wheels.”

“You want to borrow my car?”

“Yeah. My engine’s busted up. I got to get to Rosecroft for the races tonight.”

“Your new sports car’s busted, so you want to borrow my old Pontiac?”

“Hey, man, a Celica isn’t exactly a sports car.”

I was thinking about the way Mookie drove cars. Fast.

“. . . and it isn’t new, either.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I replied. “What is it then, a year old?”

“Two years. Almost. It’ll be two years in August.”

I looked down, screwed up my face, and slowly shook my head. Then I turned to Mookie and smiled, “In August? You bought your car in August? Who buys a car in August?”

“Well, what do ya say?”

“The keys are on the floor over there. Next to my book bag and errant three-pointer.” I hadn’t had a chance to pick them up after my sprint to the phone.

Mookie pushed his thin lips out and nodded his head as he jive-walked over to the keys. He reached his arms down in an exaggerated dance move and lifted them up with two fingers. Then he swiveled and jived back. He left the Coke can where it was.

“What are you auditioning for?” I laughed.

“Hey, what’s the problem? I’m half American, remember? An Amerasian with *soul*.”

I shook my head and began putting away the perishables. When I turned around again, Mookie was still there, combing

his stringy black hair with one hand and swinging my keys like a pendulum with the other.

“What’s the matter? I said you could take it. Just don’t wreck it, that’s all. I can’t afford to replace it.”

A pained expression drew itself across Mookie’s face. We stood in silence as I watched him grimace. “Um, there’s just one little problem . . . you see . . .” He sidled around my tiny counter and jangled the keys close to his face. “It’s about my license.”

“You lost your driver’s license?”

“Just a technicality. I’ll get it back in a week. But, meanwhile, I’ve got to get to Rosecroft tonight. Can you take me?”

“What’s so important about tonight?”

“I’ve got the winners.”

“Sure, Mookie.”

“It’s the truth. I swear by the Holy Virgin.”

“I thought you were Buddhist.”

“Amerasian, remember? I can be any combination I want to be.”

“This is bullshit, Mookie.”

“No, I’ve got to go. I owe some money. I know the winners.”

“If you owe some money, the track’s the last place to be. Look, if you’re short, I’ll lend you some –”

Now it was Mookie’s turn to laugh. “Look, I may be cashed out, but at least I’ve got my principles.”

I was thankful someone did, so I drove Mookie over to the track.

When we got there, Mookie was very insistent that we sit in a particular section. Then he took a racing form from his hip pocket. He was betting on four races. He went into long explanations about why certain horses and riders were better than others.

A race was already in progress as we settled in. The lights were on but it wasn’t fully dark yet. The October air was brisk and refreshing. The crowd was a strange mixture. I’d never been to

horse races before. The whole idea of horses racing against each other seemed rather unusual to me. This was because horses were no longer the normal form of transportation. However, as an historian I could picture it as a throwback to the horse-and- buggy days – or perhaps to the days of ancient Rome and the charioteers. I preferred this way of thinking about it.

“So this is what you do when you place the bets,” Mookie began.

A sharp knee in the back ended my vision. “I’m not betting,” I said as I turned to see the culprit. An old woman was seated behind me scanning her racing form like a veteran. Her shoulder-length gray hair and brightly colored clothes lent her an air of aggressive eccentricity. I turned back around without saying anything.

“No, you don’t understand,” Mookie said. “I want you to place my bets.”

I screwed up my face. Mookie motioned for me to lean closer. He spoke in very subdued tones. “You see, I got this inside information. Tip. That’s what I got. A tip. And you see, I can’t bet it.”

“You can’t bet a tip?” I asked a little too loudly. He motioned for me to be quieter.

“They got rules and regulations. Very strict. Look. I’m desperate. Very important. All you got to do is bet the races I’ve got circled on the form. I’ve got all the money. Here.” He furtively thrust a wad of bills into my hand and pushed me out of my seat and in the direction of the betting windows. “I wrote it all out. No problem.”

As I walked over to the windows, it occurred to me that the real reason Mookie wanted me to take him to the track was so that I could place his bets. That driver’s license story was probably a lie. Since when did Mookie bother with such things as driver’s licenses, anyway?

No. Somebody had warned Mookie to stay away from the track. But Mookie had seen a chance to get a cut for himself. Only he had to “watch out” for that *somebody*. That’s where I came in.

What worried me was whether that *somebody* had been watching and was now watching *me*. A wiry old lady pushed ahead of me, digging her elbow into my ribs as she passed. It was the same old woman who had been seated behind me. I was about to say something to her when I noticed that her right arm was withered; it simply didn't work. Suddenly, her girlishly long gray hair and garish clothes no longer seemed a badge of aggressiveness. I felt guilty at having been angry at her at all. I moved in line behind her. The crowd in front of the steel-barred betting booths emanated restless anxiety. People of all shapes and sizes closely guarded their picks as they waited for their tote tickets – tickets they hoped would bring them into some money.

When it was my turn, I stepped up to the black bars. The young blond-haired man seated behind the bars might have been a bank teller. I started to tell him my bets but, not having a very good understanding of track betting, I was apparently using the wrong language. This was my first time, and the whole experience was totally foreign. So I ended up sliding my racing form under the thick protective glass to the man.

This got results.

In short order, I had a handful of tickets. I made my way back to the grandstand. When I got to my seat, I found that Mookie was not there. Nor was the old lady.

Not knowing what to do but wait, I set about trying to make sense of how betting worked. It seems that there are three basic bets: win, place, and show. The latter two pay off more often, and so they pay less money. The racing odds are always changing and are a function of the betting activity. Kind of like the stock market. My bets were all “to win.” People around me were trying combination bets, with exotic names such as “exacta,” “perfecta,” and “daily double.” Mookie had kept it simple. Less to foul up.

I was mulling this over, when the bells sounded and the race began. For the first few moments the horses maintain the line order they had at the starting gate. But just as your eyes have a

fix on everything, the jockeys move their mounts in a daring cut to the inside lane as they make the first turn. This is dangerous stuff. Ten horses in a bunch doing forty or fifty miles per hour with a clearance between animals of half-a-foot. A sudden miscalculation would be a fatal mistake.

As the horses rounded the first turn, the tight conglomeration had thinned so that no more than three horses were abreast. I tried to match the racing form numbers to the modern-day charioteers. But the task was futile. I had to look up to witness the backstretch where animal muscles shined from the overhead floodlights. At this point the horses seemed to be moving in slow motion: a captivating display of power and grace. The line of racers was thin and growing longer. At the front was a horse whose jockey was wearing blue. Behind him, by the length of a horse, was a rider in red.

When they entered the last turn it seemed like blue had it wrapped. But coming out of the turn, red swung wide and was pulling up. Blue didn't like this and I thought I saw the jockey swing his stick at the other rider. I didn't think that seemed legal.

Blue was flogging his horse but to no avail. Red had pulled even when suddenly it was over. Who had won?

I looked up to the scoreboard. The results were displayed so that even a neophyte like me could follow them. I looked at the winner, then at the tickets in my hand. Mookie's horse had won. With the urging of some people around me, I went back to the betting windows to collect Mookie's winnings. I learned the routine after a couple of races. After three of Mookie's picks came through, I stopped returning to my seat with my winnings. I was getting too many winners. I didn't want to draw attention.

Instead, I hung out in the indoor lounge, where they filled your glass and dulled your mind to everything except the closed-circuit television image of what was happening outside on the track. It seemed incredible to me that people would watch a race on a screen when they could be seeing it firsthand. But perhaps

I was missing the whole point of it all. The cosmic lotto: betting. A way to beat one's karma. Watching the people sitting there under a smoky cloud from their cigarettes made me want to drink. I decided it was time to step outside.

"It's all in the stars," said a young man in a brown, well-worn suit, who was standing just outside the lounge.

"The stars?"

"Yeah. You gotta believe."

"The stars?"

"The zodiac controls us all. Let me know your sign and we can sit down together."

I turned away and heard a priest explaining to an open-mouthed, jug-eared man, "Do you think they name these horses randomly? What you do is assign a value to each letter. *A* gets one, and *B* gets two, and so forth. Then you add them all up and divide by the day of the year . . ."

I walked on.

A woman in what looked to be a turban was explaining her system to anyone who would listen. "What you do is throw out the red herrings. They always put a few in the race to trick you. Once you've gotten rid of the red herrings . . ."

Young women. Young men. Clergymen. Clergywomen. Stockbrokers. Plumbers. Fishmongers. "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he / And all he did done perfectly / As though he had but that one trade alone."

I wonder if Yeats bet on horses. He *was* Irish.

I found myself returning to the lounge and watching the next couple of races with a Jameson in one hand and Mookie's racing form in the other.

There goes my budget. It was true. My budget was too tight for five-dollar drinks at the track. Of course I had a million dollars, but at this point all that was play money. I didn't really believe in it anyway.

I drank my money. My pockets were stuffed with cash. But, unfortunately, it belonged to Mookie.

After the last race I was broke, my own money spent on drinks. Tomorrow – later this morning – I'd have to face the five-thirty alarm and early-morning cross-country practice. Right now, I wanted to find Mookie and give him his money.

My head was spinning. Whiskey has a way of sneaking up on you. Just when you think you're safe, it shows up.

I collected myself and headed toward the car. I'm always forgetting where I've parked and often have this dark fantasy of wandering endlessly in a gigantic parking lot never to find my way out. "Man found dead in row 444E. Keys still in hand."

As I descended the stadium's cement ramps, I saw the old woman with the lame arm. In any other circumstance, she would have been an object of pity – but now she brought me out of my daze. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought she was watching me.

I started bumping into people.

"Qué pasa, compadre?"

I looked around and saw Mookie. "Since when do you speak Spanish, Mookie?"

"Since when do I do anything, compadre?"

We drove home on the freeway. I was watching out for my turn. It was a turn-off that I often missed because the exit sign was not for an exit. It led to another freeway – the Beltway. An exit takes you off a freeway and not onto another one. Anyway, I remembered the wad of bills in my pocket.

"Seventy-three hundred. Nice job," said Mookie after he counted out the money while we were still seated in my car in the apartment parking lot. "How much do you want, Michael?"

I waved my hand in the air. I didn't want his profits. Mookie didn't press the point. He scrambled out. "Hey man, I owe you."

I lingered in my car, thinking about the old woman with the withered arm. I wondered, suddenly, if she had played any role in Mookie's winnings, and if I'd ever see her again. Then I

heard a car engine start. I watched Mookie drive away in his Celica.

It was time to go to bed.

Once in my apartment, I saw that I had never picked up my backpack from where I'd dropped it earlier. I knelt down. Next to it was my mail: an advertisement from Macy's, some shampoo samples, and a letter from Ash. How could I have missed it?