

ONE HUNDRED HORSES, RUNNING

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Can a man make gods for himself?

No gods are they!

Jeremiah 16:20

In my father's stories, his point of view and mine converge and coalesce as in a dream, or a nightmare, to make their own sense of our commingled chaos.

It is Friday night. My father, Sam Bernstein, sits at the head of the table. Mother has lit the Shabbes candles and their flames paint flickering shadows on the kitchen counter. Mother ladles out the weekly borsht into our soup bowls. The red beet borscht, with a dollop of sour cream and white boiled potato, brings to our dinner table my father's shtetl in Belarus, even here, in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

"When the *pogromchiks* were coming, they tore into our shtetl on horseback, and the sound of a hundred horses' galloping over the fields signaled us to hide in the trenches."

I am the youngest, and so ask the first question. "What are trenches?"

"Ditches. We dug them to hide in."

The elder child, the son, asks. "Couldn't they see you in the trenches?"

"No. We stripped branches off birch trees and laid them over the trenches."

"Why didn't you hide in your houses, and lock the doors?"

My father stares at the strained beets in his bowl, at the blood-red soup, and his voice drops low and slow.

"Because... after the *pogromchiks* left, our shtetl looked like enemy soldiers had fought their way through it, house by house."

It is a tale he told when I was 7, 8, 9 years old, about things that happened to him, through the Russian Civil War, when he was 7, 8, 9 years-old. He told these tales, in fragments, at the dinner table, when no one was stronger or smarter than he, and I couldn't imagine him a horrified little boy trembling in a trench.

But now I can imagine: While renegade Red Army or White Army soldiers, crazed with hatred of Jews, stampeded over paltry gardens overhead, little Shloimie hid in a trench, and a rabbi or an uncle held a hand over his mouth to ensure silence. And from that trench, with that hand over his mouth, he could hear women who hadn't made it to the trenches—women who nursing infants or plucking chickens—screaming bloody murder, or worse—only he didn't know what worse was, until one day he climbed out of his trench and saw fields splayed open and bloodied with crushed beets, and a woman lay on the ground legs splayed open long peasant skirt bunched up around her waist drenched in blood around her private parts, and that's how he found out what they did to the women who were screaming worse than bloody murder.

After dinner my brother and I go out into the warm New Mexico night to join the neighborhood kids in a summer-evening game of Hide and Seek; and when I scream long and shrill into the hollow night sky in voice that sounds terrified but is only a silly little girl about to be tagged by her brother, my father shouts, "Stop that screaming, Laurie! Stop it, for God's sake!" I think he's just in another bad mood and wants to spoil our fun—but he's hearing women, screaming worse than bloody murder.

Shloimie Bernstein moved Out West, to New Mexico, as far away from a shtetl in Belarus or or any other Jewish ghetto as he could get. But not far enough.

He peddled candy and tobacco at all the Trading Posts on the Indian Reservations, throughout the Four Corners area, where New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona meet, amid

alien-looking rock formations, and desolate tracts of lava and limestone. He drove 800 miles a week from one Indian trading post to the another, lugging boxes of Hershey candy bars and Lucky Strikes cigarettes from the back of his 1962 black and white station wagon to the counter of the trading posts. By the end of the week, he'd have maybe two, three hundred bucks to show for it.

On Fridays— in time for Shabbes dinner— he pulls into the driveway, with gifts from the Zuni, Hopi, Navajo: turquoise bracelet for Mother, toy tomahawk for my brother. For me, plastic tawny-colored dolls, dressed in white leather squaw dresses and moccasins, black braided hair adorned with red and yellow feathers.

At bedtime, if he's in a good mood, he picks me up and carries me in his arms, tosses me on the bed like a little ragdoll, and tickles me until, giggling, I beg him to stop. Then he stoops to kiss me good-night, tousles my hair, gives me one last belly tickle and leaves me.

Saturday, he rests at Ruidoso Downs, the horse track two and a half hours southeast of Albuquerque, a red clay track mounted among mountains feathered with Ponderosa Pine.

Sam pushes through the turnstile like he owns the track, or at least his special place in the turf club, and people recognize and call out to him in friendly greetings. He studies the racing program expertly, places his bets, carefully based on handicaps, pedigrees, trainers, jockeys, exercise routine—but ultimately, Sam knows, it comes down to luck.

Sam summons the Goddess Luck with carefully followed ritual: He steps up to the pari-mutuel window furthest to the right, places his bet with Catherine and not Pearl at that window after he smiles and she smiles; slips his tickets into his left breast pocket. He says nothing to anyone as he walks back to his table at the turf club, waving silently to anyone who calls out to him, if he follows the ritual religiously, Lady Luck might come and sit at his elbow. If he

changes one minutiae of the ritual, Lady Luck's wings may brush against his neck, as she flutters away.

At the parade to post, Diamond Midnight is frisky and her odds real long, the way Sam likes them. He's watched this three-year-old for a season, studied the trainer and jockey and stats. The announcer's voice calls excitedly through the P.A. System: "The horses are AT the gate."

Ten racehorses crash out of ten metal gates.

All race horses are Pegasus, and Sam can see them fly.

Diamond Midnight comes fast out of the gate. At the turn, she's pushed into an outside position. Sam roots his horse on, and his voice—huge and tremulous— electrifies the air around him. C'MON DIAMOND MIDNIGHT. GET UP THERE. C'MON! His horse drives through a hole and at the stretch comes hard-driving up on the inside rail, crossing the finish line first by a head. Everyone's cheering, shouting, yelling, pumping and waving their arms in the air, but the most jubilant, the most exhilarated, the voice that resonates above all others is Sam's.

When he gets home, chicken soup with matzoh balls await him.

"Hurry and wash up before everything gets cold," Mother says to greet him. She calls us to dinner. The 6:00 o'clock news with Walter Cronkite has just come on.

He takes his place at the head of the table, lifts his soup spoon to his mouth, and begins slurping up his soup.

"So, how'd you do at the track today?" Mother asks, her back to him, as she stirs the pot of soup and matzoth balls on the stove.

"Not bad. Broke even."

"You always break even," She says, moving now to his place at the table, and dropping two matzoth balls into his soup bowl.

"Yeah. Well, maybe I did a little better than break even today. Maybe I hit an exacta with a long shot." He slurps a spoonful of soup. "And maybe I didn't."

His voice swings playfully, or maybe that rise in tone is a move toward anger. One never knows. Mother persists.

"*Nu?* How'd you do?"

He puts down his spoon with too much force. "I broke even, I said! Leave me alone already." But she doesn't.

"The last time you broke even, you won \$500. How much did you break even this time?"

He yanks three bills out of his wallet and holds them up. "Here! If I give you a few bucks, will you get off my back?" He crumples one of the bills into a little ball and hurls it toward her feet; she bends to pick it up, then stands and unfolds the bill. Using her thumbs and index fingers like two clothespins, she displays a twenty-dollar bill. A coy smile crosses her lips.

"Ah, you can do better than this, Sam. C'mon." She moves close to her husband.

"Whatcha' got in there?" She pats him on his pants pocket.

Rather than push his wife away with the force of his rage, he grips the wooden dining table and tilts it steep enough to make soup bowls and plates slide off and chicken soup splatter hot and slippery all over the hardwood floor. My brother fetches a broom and sweeps up shards and splinters of white plaster into the dustpan I hold for him, and I cut my hand and there is blood on a white shard and on my hand. Our father has disappeared into the den to watch what is left of the 6 o'clock news.

Sunday morning, he enters the kitchen redolent of Old Spice, his thick Russian hair smoothly combed, his face fresh-shaven. Mother is making breakfast.

"You're dressed," she says.

"Yeah."

"Going to the track again today?"

"Yeah."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"Coupla poached eggs." She rummages around the kitchen, opening and closing cupboard doors and drawers and making little housewife noises.

Breaking eggs on the side of the metal saucepan, her back to him, she says: "I'd like to come with you today."

"Naw. Not today."

"Not any day."

"Don't start." She places the poached eggs neatly on his plate, next to the toast which he dunks into the yolks.

He is slipping on his sports jacket when I patter barefoot into the kitchen.

"Where're you going, daddy?"

"'Mornin', mommele!"

"Where're you going?"

"To the track," he walks toward me. "To watch the ponies run."

"I wanna come. I wanna watch the ponies run, too."

He grabs me around the waist and hoists me into the air; my long child-fine hair cascades onto his face, all ruddy and grinning now. He burrows a fist playfully into my tummy and tickles me 'till I giggle and squeal.

"Put me down. Put me down!" He sets me down, and with his big bear-paw hands, smoothes strands of hair away from my face.

"Naw. You stay here and help your mother. I'll see youse guys later."

This is where, in the telling of the story, the points of view merge for the sake of sense, for the sake of forgiveness.

Sam drives fast along the highway through spacious tracts of chaparral, beneath the smooth blue dome of New Mexico sky up into the mountains. His heart beats harder the higher into the mountains he climbs, the nearer he gets to Ruidoso, his beloved horse track. His face lights up when he espies the red-clay oval track, like a garnet set in emeralds. He strides like a nobleman through the turnstile. A steward greets him by name. He trots up the stairs to take his place in the Turf Club, at the table reserved in his name. He takes his seat high up in the Turf Club, like a throne, with a full view of the horses in the gates, so he can watch the instant when 10 horses crash out of the gates, and herald their coming.

The track is Sam's sanctuary, the place where he can, without fear, stand up and shout in a voice so loud that he can be heard even above the sound of a hundred horses, running.