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By Chris Lynch

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Editorial Review

Review

* "Lynch's writing, parched with desert-dry humor, is so fine that a breakfast table conversation is just as gripping as the paranoia-laced scenes of the trio evading a shadowy doom. A compact, frayed-nerves bundle of brilliance.--*Booklist*, starred review

"A great premise, developed with brilliant prose...characters are sympathetically and vividly evoked, and the brief novel is a model of good writing."--*The Horn Book*

"A psychological exploration that leaves readers with just as many interesting questions as answers."--*School Library Journal*

"Lynch's masterly balance of life-or-death road trip and tender grandfather/grandson relationship makes this an unusual, first-rate thriller."--*BCCB*

About the Author

Chris Lynch is the Printz Honor Award–winning author of several highly acclaimed young adult novels, including Printz Honor Book *Freewill*, *Iceman*, *Gypsy Davy*, and *Shadow Boxer*—all ALA Best Books for Young Adults—as well as *Killing Time in Crystal City*, *Little Blue Lies*, *Pieces*, *Kill Switch*, *Angry Young Man*, and *Inexcusable*, which was a National Book Award finalist and the recipient of six starred reviews. He holds an MA from the writing program at Emerson College. He teaches in the Creative Writing MFA program at Lesley University. He lives in Boston and in Scotland.

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Kill Switch



I love my Da to bits.

Which will probably come in handy, as bits is what he's in.

Da is my grandfather. He wears a MedicAlert bracelet, copper, that reads, MEMORY LOSS. He asks what it is a couple of times a day. I tell him. He's cool with it.

Because he is a cool grandfather, always was. Retired early from some government job that was something like systems analyst for the Department of Agriculture. Never, ever talked about his work. Might have been because who in his right mind would ever have bothered to ask about a job as boring as that? Might have been.

Retired early, because he had worked his whole adult life after the army, had worked hard and faithful and what he got for that hard work was his brain started retiring before he did. Nothing serious. Medium-level comedy stuff like walking home at the end of a workday. Forgetting he took his car to work, and he needed to take it home again. Arriving, carless, at home about three hours late. That kind of stuff.

Apparently, though, systems analysts for the Department of Agriculture need full faculties. Can't have Idaho spuds suddenly coming up looking like giant strawberries because of a couple of wobbly keystrokes.

So here he is, around and available every day. Cool as cactus juice, like always, but just more available. He lives with us now. That is as it should be. I like it.

We have been pals forever, me and Da. As a young father he was too busy, career building or agriculture networking or whatever, to do a lot of things like teaching his son, my dad, to swim and ride a bike. My gran did all that, and you could tell from the way they were with each other. My dad cried for about two months after peritonitis crept in and squeezed his mother to death.

I never saw my dad and his dad hug.

I hug my dad's dad all the time. Hug my own here and there too, so we're cool. Not the same, though. Not the same at all.

Da taught me to ride: bike, horse, motorcycle, and car. Oh, and glider plane, we did that once. Taught me to cook a little. We've tossed footballs and baseballs back and forth since I was little, but more now that he's retired.

Taught me how to talk, even.

"Keep it lean, Young Man," he always said when I would start running my mouth. "Use exactly the words you need, and no more than that."

"Okay, Old Boy," I said.

Not sure if you would call it jealousy. My dad never got in the way of my closeness to Da, but he was never all over thrilled with it either.

"You know why he does it, don't you, Daniel?" Dad said, chilling the blood right out of me because he was saying it as the two of us stood in front of his mother's open casket.

I couldn't speak. He didn't need me to.

"He does it because of all he didn't do for me. Because of all that she did do."

He would know better than me. And there was certainly a lot of sense in what he said. And I still lacked the power of speech. And I wouldn't have spoken up if I could. But there was nothing to stop me thinking what I was thinking, either.

And because he loves me, Dad, I was thinking.

But truth is, Dad and everyone else could be forgiven for thinking I was the only one to ever see any emotion in the old man. Like he saved it up all just for me, and other than that there was nothing inside the Old Boy at all.

"You're doing it again," I say. We are having breakfast together, like we always do now.

"No, I'm not," he says. He goes back to doing it.

"You know what I'm talking about?"

“Do you know what you’re talking about?”

“Yes, Da.”

“Good, then you know what to stop talking about.”

What we are and are not talking about is sausages. He used to slice bananas over his cereal all the time. The cereal would vary, the bananas, never. Now he slices sausages, in exactly the same way, as if nothing is any different.

“You know what the doctor said about you and the sausages, Da.”

“You know what I say about the doctor and the sausages, Daniel.”

“Could you not remind me of that over breakfast?”

“Détente” is what he likes to call this. One side says or does something objectionable, the other side counters with something objectionable, then everyone agrees to just shut up.

“God, is he doing the sausage thing again?” my sister, Lucy, says, walking into the kitchen. Lucy likes to talk as if Da were not here. Da likes to talk as if Lucy were a mentally deficient prostitute. It’s kind of a thing in my life, where all the people I really love tend to treat each other abysmally. I choose to see it as a battle royale for my affection.

“In the army I knew a girl named Loose Lucy. She had webbed hands that made a squeaking sound when she would—”

“Da!” I snap. I have heard this one before.

“What?” he pleads. “That story comes with its own limerick and everything.”

“Another time, maybe.”

“Why do you hate me, Da?” Lucy asks.

“I don’t.”

He possibly does. Probably not. He says he’s nice to her for my sake, because I seem to have some kind of unfathomable warm spot in my heart for the girl. He says it’s not his fault that the niceness in question always happens when I’m out.

“Prove it, then,” she says, open palm extended.

You might think this does nothing but reinforce my grandfather’s venal view of my sister and probably of humankind. But what it really does is please the Old Boy with the notion that his lessons, his hard-won, firmly held life beliefs, have been acknowledged by the youngsters. It’s their one really good party trick together.

“Love is not money . . . ,” Da says, forking over a bill, then another, while parroting his own oft-stated

wisdom.

“But money is love,” Lucy says, delivering nicely.

“Didn’t Ben Franklin say that?” I ask.

Lucy waves her money victoriously in the air. Then she slaps me in the forehead before she passes out the back door, distant as she pleases, aloof, certain, and I ask myself yet again, how could anyone not love Lucy?

“Successful,” Da says, turning in her direction, watching her vapor trail as if she has left cunning floating in her wake, “at whatever she does. That girl is going to be just great.”

“Maybe you should tell her that every once in a while.”

“And undo all my hard work there? Not a chance.”

He takes a big spoonful of original Cap’n Crunch, with a sausage disk perched on top. He picks up the newspaper—which is sitting there from yesterday—and starts reading. The paper has clearly been read and reread, crumpled and disordered. Today’s is still rolled up on the front porch, if it hasn’t been stolen.

Here is what I like about The Condition. It shows how true Da’s opinions are, that he is not reacting to mood or weather or a bad night’s sleep when he thumps on about the government or sports or idiot businessmen. On the many occasions when he has read to me the highlights of a world that is already twenty-four hours behind us, his words are all but identical to the words he used the first time around. The same venom here, the same disgust there, the same contempt and mockery. These are the moments when Da is stamped indelibly into Da in the way time itself slips into the layers of geology in a mountainside.

Here’s what I don’t like about The Condition. Every time he repeats verbatim who he was yesterday, he’s reminding me how much closer he is to no longer being Da at all.

No unnecessary words, Young Man.

No needless repetition, Old Boy.

“I know, Da, I know,” I say, pulling away from the table. “Season’s over already. Last team to win the Super Bowl with a backup quarterback was the seventy-two Dolphins. Can’t be done.”

“Exactly” he says as I actually run down the hall, “and who’d want to be those jerks?”

Just like yesterday. Right down to the jerks.

I practically crash through the front door, so anxious to get my hands on today and bring it back for my grandfather to read. I rip the door open, and find the paper’s not lying where it’s supposed to be.

And it’s not stolen either. Not exactly.

“Daniel,” Mr. Largs says awkwardly. “Jeez, you startled me.”

Da’s old workmate, carpooler, whatever, is standing there with our newspaper. He stops in once every few

weeks to have a look at the Old Boy. I never could figure out if I liked Mr. Largs or not. Some days yes, some days no.

I don't like surprises at breakfast, though.

"Why are you here?" I ask him.

"I'm not," he says, walking past me when Da barks for him.

It'll be a no-like day, then.

I get Mr. Largs a cup of coffee and a bran muffin. Then sit at the table with the men. Hard to tell why Largs has come by just now, as he doesn't seem to have much to talk about. Mostly he's eating and listening.

Maybe that's because Da is in a talking mood.

"Beer, Largs?" Da asks.

"Cam?" Largs says, startled. Cam was Da's work nickname. "It's only nine thirty, pal?"

"Yes," Da says, all crafty-coot, "but it's afternoon in Europe. Remember the real-beer tour, Largs? Huh? Jeez, we had some fine beers on that trip. All the best local stuff, Daniel. We had Guinness in Dublin, Dinkelacker in Berlin, oh my, and everything in Brussels . . ."

You know how you can just tell when someone is looking at you even if you cannot see them? I turn to see Largs snap away from staring at me.

"That wasn't me, Cam," he says coolly.

"Of course it was. We drank Brains in Cardiff! Remember how much we laughed at that? Drinking Brains in Cardiff?" Long, thin smile slashes Da's face.

Sounds like something my grandfather would laugh at.

Largs laughs. "Ah, you mad old hatter. I never went on such a trip."

Da's smile melts, as Largs reaches across the table. He takes hold of Da's wrist, causes him to see the brass bracelet with MEMORY LOSS engraved across it for all the world to see. "We're all getting a little forgetful these days, Cam. I mean, you had the best memory of anyone I ever worked with . . . ever. So what chance do I have, huh?" He laughs, alone. "I'm heading to retirement myself in a year or two. Already forgetting left and right."

Da is now staring at the MedicAlert bracelet.

"We drank Maccabee in Tel Aviv," Da says weakly.

"We drank Bud in St. Louis," Largs says, chipper as hell. "We were purely domestic, Cam, you know that."

I hate this. I hate this. The memory loss, of course. The low-level unpleasantness that is with us now,

because of the conflict of stories? I hate this.

Largs knows better. Why does he have to win? Why can't he just fudge and fade his way through a simple stupid exchange, the way people do every day anyway? Why do we need what we're getting here?

Mostly, what is so awful is Da's realization. His unrealized. He knows something is wrong, but he cannot be sure what it is. Like he's fighting somebody in the dark.

Mostly more, even, is that I cannot stand to see him back on his heels. That's it. That's what it is for me. My Da always has the upper hand. Always had it. To see him so clearly not in charge is excruciating. And it wouldn't even matter who had the facts straight, because either way, Largs is manhandling him.

It hurts.

"Sorry to rush you," I say to Mr. Largs.

"Huh?" he says.

"We kind of had plans for this morning," I say, standing up to see him out. This is not normally my way. I have been taught respect. I have been taught deference and politeness, often giving these things to people I knew didn't deserve them. I have been taught to treat people the right way because, whatever you might be thinking about the person right in front of you, your manners are really offered to the people who taught them to you.

But I was never prepared for having to look out for my almighty Da. I was never prepared for the thought of needing to.

I have not even given Mr. Largs a chance to respond to my words before I am leading him away from my table and toward the exit.

"Okay, then, Cam," says a befuddled Largs, backing out of the kitchen. "I'll stop by again soon."

Da is still examining his bracelet, silent and consumed and possibly unaware he has had a visitor.

"Call first," I say to Largs, on the threshold of impolite, but not over it yet. I hold the door open for him.

Da is looking up at me when I re-enter the kitchen. He has his hand open, palm up, gesturing toward the mysterious piece of jewelry on his wrist.

"It's because of your memory, Da," I say. And because I always relished the challenge of making him laugh, and the thrill when I succeeded, I add, "Your memory, Old Boy, remember your memory?"

For a flickering few, he looks even more perplexed than before. Then he crinkles me a smile.

"I remember, Young Man," he says, and I can see that for now, he does.

It is a funny thing, one that I wrestle with every day now, the notion that he is required to remember that he forgets. A big cosmic joke, that one.

“Did you say we had plans?” Da asks me.

“I did,” I say.

“What plans were those, Young Man?”

He has always called me Young Man. Just not this frequently. He never forgets Young Man.

“The races of course, Old Boy.”

“The races.”

“The horses.”

Da loves the horses. I love the horses with him.

“The horses. Today?”

“First race goes off at twelve fifteen, Da. We need to get cracking if we are going to do this the right way. Right? The racing form, the grandstand . . .”

“And the first of the day,” he says, beaming, finishing our standard statement of purpose.

“The Triple Crown of earthly pleasure on a sunny day,” I say, pointing at the author of the phrase, him.

A horse, a beer, my grandfather, and a full race card. That to me is an embarrassment of riches. The fact that since I’m not strictly old enough and Da has to smuggle me the beer only adds to the fun. So much so that when my folks offered to throw a party for my high school graduation a month ago, I thanked them politely and opted instead to spend the evening after the ceremony at the track with the Old Boy.

I promised myself, anyway. With this being my last summer home before college in September. With this summer being different, in every way, practically every day, regarding Da. I promised myself we were going to be together just as much as I could manage it.

We are going together. This summer, the last summer. Everywhere, together.

He loves stuff. He’s never been a big drinker, but he loves a beer. He loves the sweaty musculature of a racehorse. He loves the awful smell of the race-day crowd that can make even the horses wince. He loves experience, and to be with him when he’s at it is to be splashed with all the overspill of his spirit.

He is a human great-day-out, my Da.

In a few minutes he is back from his room and all zipped up in his racing colors. Though they are not all that colorful. His pea-green tweed flattop cap, almost-matching baggy pants, button-down white shirt, gray jacket with lots of pockets—like a fishing vest with arms.

Still, he manages to look dapper as hell.

We are off to the races.

The sun is brilliant, and we are settled into the bleachers with a beer between us and a likewise shared racing form.

How it usually works, especially in fine weather, is that one of us does the reading while the other does the sipping and staring at the sky, the track, the birds, the other customers. Then we switch. Great system.

Only, as the sun warms my eyelids and the seagulls squawk for me to go order some French fries, I realize nobody is reading and filling me in on the day's possible winners.

"What are you doing, Da?" I ask when I open my eyes and find him hunched forward, looking at the concrete step beneath our feet. His elbows are resting on his knees, the racing form resting on the ground.

He looks to me, the flattop cap perched at the precise slight angle, more like a beret, that he always prefers. He is showing me a puzzled face that is almost as puzzling to me. "What do you want me to do, Young Man?"

I point down at the form. "I want you to read me that, like you always do, so we can pick some winners."

His eyes clarify, and focus, like they are mechanical eyes, like they are binocular eyes. "You don't need me," he says firmly.

Not crazy about the tone, so I change it.

"Of course I need you, Old Boy," I say, bumping him playfully with my shoulder. Then I bend down and retrieve the racing form. "Always have, always will."

I am stunned when I feel the grip on my arm. It is not the grip of your average old man. He lifts me right back up and brings my face close to his.

"You do not need me, Daniel," he says. "You need to not need anybody. Do you understand me?"

The three seconds I waste being speechless convinces him that I do not understand.

"Needing people is death. Needing, is death. Once you have a need, you have a flaw, you have a weakness. Once you have a weakness, you have a bull's-eye. You attract all the wrong kind of attention from the wrong people. Do you understand that?" He still grips my arm. "Do you understand? I might love you—not saying I do, but I might—but I don't need you. Nor anyone else." He says those last two sentences oddly loud, like he's putting on a show for somebody. Though there is not another better within at least six rows of us, and their body language pretty clearly indicates they could not care less about an old guy and his grandson unless one was going to be riding the other in the third race.

"I understand," I say.

He lets go, takes the beer, and relaxes back in his seat.

"Harry Horse," I say after a few more quiet minutes. Da has had his eyes closed, so I know he is appreciating the surroundings like he should. I expect things to slip into place now for our grand day.

"What?" he asks.

"I have a horse here, in the first race. His name is Harry Horse. He's thirty-three to one, but he's placed in his last three races and he loves the dry conditions. This sounds really promising."

He tips his cap back on his head. "Harry Horse?"

"Yes, sir."

"That sounds like a horse you would have picked when you were six. Do you remember, when you were little, I'd let you pick one for me out of the paper and I'd bet on him?" He smiles broadly at the memory. "Remember that?"

"Remember it? I loved it. I lived for it. Never won a nickel, though."

"That's because I never went for your foolish picks then, either. Come, let's go down to the paddock."

He hops to his feet, springy and frisky as a colt, and starts bopping his way down the grandstand toward the little parading ground where everyone gets a pre-race glimpse of the big, beautiful athletes.

"Hey," I call, running after him, "are you saying . . . you never bet on those horses for me?"

"Don't be silly," he says, not even glancing back at me. "Nobody in his right mind lets a child bet on a horse." I can tell by the sudden hunch of his shoulders, he is having a nice little chuckle for himself over this.

"Hey. Hello, hey, Da, this is my childhood, my cherished memory you are toying with here . . ."

He stops and waits for me to catch up. As soon as I do, he starts jabbing me in the chest with his index finger. "You are not a child now, though, are you? It is time for you to get grown up. It really is."

He is not poking me hard and in fact is not speaking harshly or meanly. Despite the words, the overall effect somehow manages to be warm.

Doesn't keep me from feeling sorry for myself, or for my younger self, just the same.

"Oh, come on, now," he says, grabbing me in a semiheadlock and walking me along. He would want no part of the moping. As his arm drapes around my neck, over my chest, his MedicAlert bracelet slips down his wrist. I see him look at it for several seconds as we walk.

I want no part of that.

"I still can't believe you tricked me over the bets all those times, Da."

That pulls him away from the bracelet. "What, you were just a kid. You didn't need the money. What you needed was to know that your beloved grandfather was thinking of you and doing something nice for you, even when he was out having fun with his pals. Now that's devotion."

"But you never even did the nice thing!"

"But you didn't know that! That's what was so nice about it. And it shouldn't offend you if a poor little old man saved a couple of bucks at the same time, right?"

“At no time were you a poor little old man. Ever.”

He laughs, pushes me sideways. “No harm, no foul. I looked good, you felt special . . .”

“A total win-win, huh?”

“Exactly. Cause if I betted on all those stupid glue-pots you chose, it would have been lose-lose. Mrs. Musby . . . Cotton Candy . . . Fuster Buster . . . what kind of numpty bets on horses with names like that?”

He does this trick too—making a fool of his memory-loss bracelet.

“You still remember the names I picked,” I say admiringly.

“Course I do,” he says. “You’re my boy.”

“But you never bet on them!” I shout, mock furious.

“Exactly!” he shouts, unmock delighted.

We are approaching the paddock, where the early runners are already doing their beauty parade.

“You are a mean old boy, Old Boy,” I say.

He walks a little quicker toward the horses. “You have no idea, Young Man.”

I am always shocked all over again when I see horses—especially racehorses—up close. Their polished muscles put on a show all their own as the horses just walk along, unaware of how gorgeous they are. From the way Da stares, ogles, smiles as he leans a bit too far over the rail, I don’t think he has ever lost that sensation either.

“You know, in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, they treat horse racing as something almost sacred. When I was there, the conditions I saw, the quality of the facilities, the level of attention to the welfare of the horses . . . you should be so fortunate as to live under those conditions.”

I lightly slap his shoulder with the back of my hand. “I never knew you were in the Middle East. When was that? What brought you there?”

“Oh, I was there several times. Glorious places. The corporation sent me. Business, but pleasure. Pleasurable business.”

I look at him looking at the horses. Still wearing that happy grin that makes him look younger than me. I lean out as far as him, to catch his eye and have him look at me. He looks.

“Da, didn’t Mr. Largs say you guys only worked domestic?”

“I don’t know,” he says, looking back at the horses again, smiling again. “Did he?”

I reach across and with thumb and middle finger, pull gently on his MEMORY LOSS bracelet. He stares at it. “Maybe you are remembering it all exactly right.”

"I remember," he says.

"So Mr. Largs is lying?"

He turns to face me again, his eyes close to mine.

"Mr. Largs is lying," he says. No smile.

I get a chill.

"There's your horse," Da says, pointing to the beautiful beast wearing the green and white silks.

"You're going to place a bet on him for me. I'd say you owe me. I'm right here now too, so I can see you."

He laughs, pushes back from the rail. "I guess I'm caught. Come on, Young Man, let's go see a man about a horse."

There are a number of different betting booths lined up across the asphalt ground between the stands and the track. They continually flash new odds on each horse, mostly better odds than the ones at the big, official stands inside. It is fun to think of our little bets pushing the odds one way or the other, and while that may not be exactly what is happening, I do enjoy watching the small electronic boards above the booths change while Da places his bets. I lean back on the railing behind me, sip at beer, let the sun warm my smile.

"Daniel," comes the voice from over my shoulder. "Danny boy, how are you doing?"

I don't completely turn, because I never completely turn away from my Da lately. I do a sideways quarter turn to look behind me and ahead at the same time, like a reptile. You can learn to do this, if it is really important.

"Zeke?" I say. "Well, how are you? This is a real surprise and a coincidence."

I am doing that awkward reach-up-and-back handshake with Zeke, wondering why certain types of older guys seem to have to shake a younger guy too hard and all over the place.

"Yes," he says, "so great to see you. It's been a dog's age. And your granddad too . . . what a treat. I'm glad I played a little hooky today."

Zeke is the one friend and workmate of Da's I ever saw on anything like a regular basis. He's probably a year or two older, even, and I thought he was retired by now as well. I always liked Zeke, and it was obvious Da thought a lot of him too. We haven't seen him at all since the retirement.

"So, this what the old boy is doing with his days now? I'm jealous," Zeke says.

"No," I say, "we're really not here much at—"

I stop myself when Da turns away from the betting and doesn't see me. I see what comes all over his face when he recognizes no face. Absence, comes all over his face and he toddles cluelessly away.

"Excuse me, Zeke," I say, and bolt.

When I catch up to him, he is staring at his betting slips, staring down at them and still walking forward, bumping and bouncing off people as if he does not know it is happening. I grab his arm. “Hey, you,” I say, making light, making fun where there is none.

He looks up at me with that brief horror that is his lost face and I swear I want to slap that face right off him. He stares back down at the slips and then back up at me as if somewhere in there is the correspondence of my face to that ticket. That somewhere in there is the answer and the explanation that will pull it together.

And what do you know, he does find an answer in there after all.

“If I were you,” he whispers after the last check of the ticket, “I’d kill me.”

First thing I do is, I shudder. The full xylophone thing right down my spine and back up again. Then I shout at him. It is not a shout full of reason. “Hey,” I yell at him with my scoldingest tone but little else. He stares. “Hey, Da,” I reiterate just in case he missed it the first time.

“Hey,” Zeke says, right over my shoulder to Da.

He startles me, and I turn on him now. “Do you mind?” I ask, feeling somehow like I am sheltering my grandfather from something. Much as I have always liked Zeke, I am also aware how he can be an unsettling sort of presence if you aren’t prepared for him. He’s tall and angular, always in a light gray suit and with skin and hair all the same gray color. He looks, regardless of the conditions, indoor and out, as if he’s standing right under harsh fluorescent lighting.

“Ezekiel!” Da says, and my authority and irritation blow away on the breeze. “Darius!” Zeke says, and they both brush me aside and embrace.

I am the kid here, and that is that.

We are sitting in the stands, up high enough to see well but also to bask in the sun. The first race is a couple of minutes off, and I stare at my ticket, Harry Horse to place. The old colleagues are catching up, chatting about people I know mostly by nickname—Mackie, Doctor J, the Moleskinner— and making very little sense to me. It all sounds boring enough that I think I’ll go down and have an encouraging talk with Harry Horse, until there is a slight turn to the conversation.

“Have you seen any of the guys, Darius? From the old team?”

“Not a one,” says Da with the conviction of somebody who has no idea.

“Nobody?” Zeke asks. He sounds simultaneously shocked and unsurprised. He throws me a look when I stare at his previous look.

“No, the rats,” Da continues. “Zekie, you are the first of the whole crowd. Not even a phone call.” There is a pause that one would call uncomfortable, if one liked to really understate things.

“Oh,” Zeke says, looking slicingly in my direction for some reason I cannot work out.

“Ah,” Da says, at the same time the trumpetty announcer calls out over the PA system that the horses are lining up. “Just that one guy. You know the guy, the putz. Never liked him. Came by, I don’t even know why

. . . a week ago, maybe two weeks? The guy they sent with me on the Europe trip that time. Couldn't hold his beer for beans."

"Annnnd . . . they're . . . off!" the announcer calls.

And Da is off, along with pretty much every other spectator in the place.

I do love the horses, just like Da does. To hear and feel the thump of their hooves in the turf, even halfway around the track and halfway up the stands, is to feel one of the special somethings of life. You cannot help but get it if you have working senses at all. It draws Da helplessly toward it, and when a lady stands up in front of him, he silently takes an empty seat on the bench in front of us. He's too much of a gent to ever complain to a lady who's enjoying the horses like that.

"Danny," Zeke says right into my ear.

I turn away from the action to see him looking at me, hard and gray. He appears to have no great interest in horse racing.

"People don't usually call me Danny anymore," I say, to be firm with him. I feel like I need to be firm with him, and large.

"Daniel," he says, "your granddad is not doing so well, huh?"

"He is doing fine, thanks."

I turn back toward the race, where it is already apparent that Harry Horse has better things to do than try to run faster than the other horses. Still, it's thrilling.

"Does he talk a lot of crazy?" Zeke asks me.

"As a matter of fact," I say without looking at him, "my grandfather doesn't talk any crazy at all. He gets tired. He forgets. Otherwise, he is sharper than me. Here, look," I say, showing him my ticket and my selection of no-hurry Harry.

"Listen to me, son. I love this man. Probably more even than you do—"

"No," I snap.

Da looks over his shoulder, grinning broadly at me. "I know, he's terrible. Who bets on a horse named Harry anyway? Horse actually looks like he's laughing."

"He's laughing at me, Da," I say, patting his shoulder.

He slaps my knee. "You are a good kid anyway, Young Man."

"Stop gloating, Old Boy, and watch the finish."

He hoots as he does just that, and somehow we are managing to have fun even with Zeke here trying to bleed the sunshine right out of the day. I don't know which horse is Da's, but judging from his mad, hat-throwing

celebration, I think he won.

As that happens, something very different happens between Zeke and me.

“Let me tell you just this one thing, Danny—and I am going to call you Danny because I want to talk to that beautiful kid who always showed respect and decency to this fine man right in front of us. He does talk some crazy. And when he does, you need to encourage him to talk about something else. I love this guy here and that means by extension I love you, too. So with whatever time you have left with your Da, talk about family, talk about sports, talk about girls and food and flying pigs and music and whatever else passes the time. But if he talks about his work, steer him away.”

Zeke gives my neck a small squeeze, both friendly and frightening.

“I am not even supposed to be here,” he says. “I won’t do this again. Understand? I shouldn’t even have come. This is a personal, friend visit. If you see me again, it’s going to be business. I am here out of courtesy, and I shouldn’t even be.”

And the impulse returns, protective, defensive, angry, whatever, but it doesn’t feel exactly smart.

“So, then, go,” I say.

And you know what? He does. He does what I say, and he goes, slipping away in the post-race mayhem, while the Old Boy fusses around the floor for his hat.

Da pops up, hat on head, ticket in hand. He looks around like he knows something is not right, something is missing, but he cannot quite figure out what.

Winners and losers—and there is no mistaking which is which here—begin making their way down the sunny concrete steps, toward the collection windows, the betting windows, the bars, and the bathrooms, all loading up to shoot the same shots again on the next race and then the next one.

“Whatcha win, Da?” I ask, hand on his shoulder as we bump along down.

He hands me over his ticket and I look at it and we both look up at the results board.

My horse beat his horse. And everybody else’s horse beat my horse. My grandfather may realize this, and he may not.

“Will we go for it again, Old Boy?”

“Let us go for it again, Young Man.”

He straightens his flat cap, and we go for it again.

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