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James Carragher

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Molly and Tenbrooks

James Carragher

I. The Judge's Wife

Believe me, sir, nothing makes a body feel finer on these hot summer days than sitting with my Judge right here on our veranda and thinking over the way things were in years gone by here in Boone County. But my goodness, here I am talking already and haven't even asked if you mightn't be thirsty from the long ride. Heavens no, it's no trouble at all. Wilhelmina's making a fresh pitcher of lemonade right this moment. Mr. Harrison and I both agree that our lemons are not so good this year, but Wilhelmina is making do. I've never seen anyone make do like our Wilhelmina. That's why it is so sad to watch her getting old; we're all of us getting old here. Poor Abraham. You knew about Abraham? No, how silly of me; you couldn't know about Abraham now could you? Well, Abraham passed away last winter, not so very long after your last visit if I do remember properly. He caught a fever from exercising Tenbrooks in the rain one morning and though we put him to bed that same afternoon, he developed pneumonia and died in the next week. Then Wilhelmina herself took sick right after the services for Abraham and was in bed for two weeks. The Judge decided, with Abraham gone, that we had to sell the horses. Old man Graves wanted to keep them for us, but my Judge said he's so drunk all the time he can hardly keep himself. I didn't mind so much about the younger ones. I think the only one I ever really cared about was Tenbrooks. But, Lord, how I loved that Tenbrooks. Ever since the day I first laid eyes on him at the fairgrounds before he and Molly had their race. Looking back over it, I think one of the happiest moments in my life was when the Judge came up to me that same day after they'd finished burying Molly, and said he'd bought Tenbrooks, that the fastest horse in the two states of Kentucky and California belonged to us. I was thinking about that day when his new owner came to take Tenbrooks away, and I didn't even get out of bed to watch him go. With all that sadness, I just thank God that we have such a beautiful summer and that neither the Judge or I have been ill. And now here's Wilhelmina with the lemonade. May I pour you a glass?

II. Speckled Jerry

They buried my dam, old Molly, this afternoon. I was down in the south pasture, near the river road, and heard the racket of the wagon they'd loaded her on from a long way off. No one had told me anything, but it didn't surprise me at all to see her lying there and not moving. I knew quick enough that she was dead because her tail wasn't swishing even though there was a dark blue cloud of flies all round her. What I did then was whinny as long and as loud as I could until the wagon turned off the road where I couldn't see it anymore and kept going down toward the river. I knew she could never hear my whinny, but it seemed like I ought to do it anyway because she was a good old horse which no one thinks is very important over there anymore. They've even almost forgotten how she won the best race this county's ever seen yet or is likely to see. She must of been about twenty when she died, but she used to tell me she was just four when they put her on the train in California and rode her all the way east here to Kentucky. They kept her in a closed up car while her owner rode further up in a fine shiny coach and only came back to see her once a day with liquor so much on his breath that she started to wheeze as soon as he stepped into the car and would take her face in his hands and say, "We'll show these Kentucky boys what kind of horse comes from California, eh Molly girl?" They arrived and the first thing she saw when they unboarded the car and took her off the train was Tenbrooks standing there in the sun tied to a tree, very still, not even shaking his beautiful shaggy grey mane. He saw her too and the crowd who'd come down to meet the train started huzzahing them both but neither of them paid any attention to the people because they were both looking at each other until, it seemed like simultaneously but she said maybe Tenbrooks heard it a little sooner, they both heard between shouts of the crowd the sound of a hammer pounding and looked at the building next door to the railroad station where a man was building a coffin. A coffin way too big for any person, so they knew it would be for one of them. After that they didn't look at each other anymore and in awhile the people got tired of huzzahing and Tenbrooks' people came and led him away and Molly followed her owner down to a cramped, drafty barn just off the main street where they kept her until the race.

Lots of times I'd ask her about the race, but she always looked at me fierce and then ran off to the far side of whatever pasture we were in. But through the years I kept my ears open and picked up most of the story of how they raced side by side down the straightaway and crossed the finish line in a dead heat, but just as soon as they got across, Tenbrooks collapsed and died and they put him in that ready made coffin and buried him before sunset. My dam watched the burial from a shady grove of cottonwoods, not saying anything. Afterwards Tenbrooks' owner made an offer too good to be passed up and Molly's old owner bought a large supply of Kentucky whiskey and went back to California in his shiny coach alone. Molly moved into the stall that used to be Tenbrooks'. After I was born I'd sometimes hear her thrashing around in the night and I'd whinny over to ask what was the matter and she'd say how she

couldn't sleep for thinking about Tenbrooks. I always felt she was wishing real bad that Tenbrooks could have been my sire.

III. Luke

Fore sunrise this morning, I went out t th barn, saddled up Speckled Jerry an rode him on down th road past th south pasture t th river. By th time we got t th shore, th sun was jes comin up an there was some nice little clouds o mist risin off th river. I got offa Jerry, squatted down beside him with th reins in my left hand an trailin my right hand through th water an somehow found myself thinkin about Jerry's dam, th mare Molly, as fine a horse as I ever seen here in Kentucky an I say that an mean it, not carin who hears it, even though she was California born an bred. What I got t thinkin on was th night she gave birth t Jerry. Musta been bout three years t th day after she licked ol Tenbrooks an we had ourselves one terrific storm that night with th wind howlin like t knock down all th trees from here t th county line. That was th same night lightnin burned up ol man Graves cabin an him inside o it. But we didn't know about that until a couple o days later. Anyhow, we figgered Molly'd have herself a rugged time cause her last foal like t killed her. So I'm jes about thirteen then an th first thing th old man does is sen me inta town for th vet soon's we see that Molly's time is jes about here. An I hightail inta town an come back on out with th vet in his buckboard, th both of us soaked t th skin an him without a change o clothes by th time we get back here. Pa's got all th lanterns burnin in th barn. You can hear th shutters bangin open an shut an Molly laborin with Jerry. Evry now an agin she'd give this half hearted little whinny like she jes couldn' stand it no more an th vet ud stand close t her then an start his talkin low t her an he kep up th talkin all night, jes as steady as th rain, until right aroun five in th mornin Jerry was born, an that's all he done all night was talk an if we was payin for his talk, well, shit, Pa or I coulda done that jes as well as him. We could all of us see that havin Jerry took about all she had outta Molly an though we kep tryin t build her up durin th fall, we knowed she was gonna have a hard ol time makin it through th winter. An she only lasted until th week after Christmas, leaving this little whippersnapper of a horse without a mom an him only five months old. That's all a good ten years back now but it come t me this mornin while I was crouchin beside Jerry with my one hand danglin in th river. Now I don't rightly know what it was brought Molly t mind unless I made some kinda connection between t'day and those days when I used t saddle her up a little before sunrise an bring her down here by th river or over t th fair-grounds where she beat Tenbrooks an he had his heart attack an keeled over dead jes as th race ended.

IV. Old Man Graves

Livin in Boone County ain't ever been th most excitin way a man could spend his life. Fact is, nuthin been happenin round here near as excitin as that night a dozen years ago when lightnin hit mah old shack and burned her right down t th ashes. If I hadn't picked that night t ride on in—in th pourin rain

yet, like it were some kind o message from th Good Lord on High—t Jed Stree-ter's saloon t do a little drinkin I'da been burned t a crisp with everythin else an wouldn' be here t tell about th one time that not only th eyes o Kentucky, but th eyes o this whole great nation o ours was fastened right here on this little town smack in th middle o Boone County. It were back on Indypendants Day in seventy eight when Molly raced Tenbrooks. Couple days earlier, on th secon I believe, evrybody turned out t meet th train bringin Molly in from out west. Course stories o her runnin reached Boone County long afore she did and since Tenbrooks never lost on a straight mile track t th Memphis train, let alone anythin beast or human, Jess Mitchell, th coffin maker, who's in his own now, said he figgered on how one or th other would run itself t death outta pure pride an commenced t build th bigges coffin anybody's ever seen in these parts. He worked on it night an day, with his kid helpin, an we could hear him still poundin an sawin th mornin we all stood around waitin for Molly's train. Soon's she got offa th train, th sheriff starts leadin cheers for th two o them. First a big yell for Tenbrooks, an then one for Molly an evrybody tossin hats up inta th air an men holdin their younguns up t see over th crowd th two o them, but Molly an Tenbrooks not so much as givin a howdy do t any o th thousands o people aroun em. It's hard t fergit th two o them standin there, starin at each other like both o them knew exactly what they was here for an wanted t git on with it right then. They was two beautiful horses, alright. Tenbrooks big an grey with that shaggy mane that flew all round him when he ran an Molly much smaller but with her head tossed high an back like she was tellin Tenbrooks that size never won any race yet an he's only gonna beat her by runnin faster than he's ever run before. Above th sheriff's cheerleadin, we hear Mitchell poundin in those nails an Molly an Tenbrooks look over toward him like they know what's what an maybe they sure enuff do cause I ain't yet seen th good horse that's not smart too.

All next day people are comin down from Memphis for th race an evry saloon in town runs outta liquor an for th only time in histry round these parts you can't even beg a bed on th night o th third. Maggie Maloney's girls worked so hard that most o them slept right through th race. Late that afternoon th Judge and Sheriff Kennedy go on out t th fairgrouns with th two owners an measure out th straight mile. People commence t takin their places right then an it's damn hard t keep evrybody from spillin over on th track where Tenbrooks an Molly are sponse t run.

By noon on th fourth you cain't get close t th fairgrouns. Memphis newspapermen kep sayin there was moren a hunnert thousan people there an I'm not th one t quibble with em. I'm down by th startin line when they bring th horses through th crowd from th barns. I can see that Kiper's ridin Tenbrooks like always an Molly has her own jockey from out west that nobody ever caught th name of. Judge Harrison stans at th startin line with his pistol an th crowd starts up hollerin with women cryin cause o th heat an tension an kids bawlin cause they can't tell what all th excitement's about. Then th Judge pulls th trigger an they're off. I see Molly jump an fore I rightly know wha t she's gone a

hunnert yards an Tenbrooks barely off th startin line. Well, lookin down th track, I cain't hardly see th horses for th clouds o dust they're raisin, but it looks like Tenbrooks is startin t gain on Molly though Kiper still holds im in a little. Nobody can unnerstan no reason for that but Kiper keeps hold in im back with Molly still ahead an th finish comin up fast. So th shout goes up fer Kiper t give em th bridle an let Tenbrooks run. By now I cain't see nuthin with all th dust, but I hear th shouts increasin from th crowd down by th finish line so I'm sure they mus be pretty near th finish. Suddenly on top o all th shoutin comes a big cheer, so I figger Tenbrooks musta caught her, an then evrybody, stead o cheerin all th more, quiets down like their hearts was standin still. I have no idea at all what's happened until th dust clears a little an I look down th track a mile an see th body o that horse still an unmovin in th sun.

V. Casey James

Sure, I was in th crowd th day he beat Molly. Only time since I been railroadin that I missed a day o work, but who's thinkin about takin a train ride on that day anyway? I seen em come racin down th stretch with Molly leadin an her head tossed high but fevered lookin an Tenbrooks comin right behind her an gainin evry second until jes as they go pass th finish line he sticks his head out an gets his nose across ahead o Molly. Well sir, I let out a yell t raise th dead but I guess they was already waked up anyway cause th crowd was makin more noise than a hundred engines comin straight at ya full throttle. But right then, with me havin th yell hardly outta my throat, Molly stumbles an falls still on th ground. I'm sure right away that she's dead an I guess everybody else is too cause they all stop cheerin an nobody makes a soun. Tenbrooks looks back an sees her lyin there. He wants t go back t where she is, but Kiper won't let him an walks him off in th opposite direction t cool him down. When we bury her in th little cottonwood grove on th rise behin th fairgrounds, Kiper fetches Tenbrooks an ties him in th shade so he can watch if he wants, but Tenbrooks never once looks over at what we're doin an I think probly he's thinkin about her in his horse way an is maybe wishin they hadn run at all on such a hot day.

After th race I don't see Tenbrooks for weeks an weeks an I feel sorta like I lost a real good friend. Here in Kentucky we got a sayin bout never missin your water til the well runs dry an I guess that's th way I felt over Tenbrooks cause all th days before th race when I'd come aroun Silver Bend an see him in th pasture alongside th track waitin for me t pull up even with him in th engine so's he can race th train—an him from a standin start remember—an beat it clean even when I'd open up on th throttle, beat it clean for about five hundred yards until he had t slow up or run head on inta a strand o barbed wire. Well, all those days I never thought much about him. He was always there an I never expected it t be any different. But after that race an Molly dyin, I'd never see him in th pasture an I realized how much I'd looked forward t racin him. It give me somethin t think about othern reachin Memphis a minute or two before or after th hour an I liked that. Sometimes goin by th empty pasture where he

used t run me, I wondered why I didn't see him no more an decided that some-way it had t be on account o what happened t Molly.

Now, o course, when I think about it I wish he'd never come near that pasture again when I went through, but th first day I come round Silver Bend an see him standin off in th field I near t jumped outta th engine for joy. He wasn't anywhere near th line an didn't make no motion like he wanted t race when I steamed on through. But I was pretty certain that whatever'd got him back in that pasture would pretty sure get him up next t th tracks waitin for me an th engine before too many more days passed. I could tell ya how he kep movin little by little closer t th track each day, but t make along story short, by th next week we was racin th same as always except he started standin right there at the spot where Silver Bend ends an th secon t last straightaway afore Memphis begins. Afterwards, one o th things I asked myself was why o all th places t stan in th pasture he had t be waitin at that one particular spot.

I knowed I was runnin pretty near a quarter hour late that day but th only ones t blame for that was th Rubber Junction crew bein so slow with th water. What I mean is that knowin I was late, I mighta come through Silver Bend three, four miles faster than usual. So it coulda been my fault, an th track was pretty bad along there, an then maybe it was th engine. Whatever, I seen Tenbrooks waitin an slowed her a little an then felt her jumpin an blew on th whistle t get Tenbrooks movin but he started too late an we broke clean clear o th track an Tenbrooks never had th chance of a sinner in Hell.

VI. The Judge's Wife

Let me just pour you a fresh glass of lemonade and then I'll tell you about the surrey. There. Now let me see. Oh, yes, it would be Christmas six years ago that the Judge surprised me with the surrey. When Wilhelmina began clearing off the breakfast dishes that morning, Mr. Harrison stood up and invited me to accompany him to the veranda. I asked him what on earth for; I wanted to start my knitting. But he wouldn't take no for an answer—my Judge is like that—and led me by the hand out of doors. Well, when I saw Abraham sitting in the prettiest little surrey I'd ever laid eyes upon in our God's country, I gave Mr. Harrison such a hug and right there in front of Abraham so that he whispered that I must remember we were in the presence of the help.

Now all this was only three weeks after the Memphis train jumped the tracks in the back pasture and gave Tenbrooks such a bad fright. The judge said he might still be skittish and that's why Abraham had hitched Molly to the surrey rather than Tenbrooks. I said that was fine but asked Mr. Harrison to insist that Abraham try Tenbrooks in harness again very soon. Of course, it wasn't that I was unhappy with Molly in the harness. I can remember many pleasant rides on spring days along the river and Molly so gentle that a child could drive that surrey with her. It's just that riding with Tenbrooks . . . oh, how can I say it? Riding with Tenbrooks I'd get so *excited* when the wind came whistling all around me and blew his beautiful shaggy mane every which way. I'd take a peaceful ride one day and an exciting ride the next and tell the Judge it was

the best gift a man could ever give his wife and that I never wanted any horse except Molly or Tenbrooks hitched to my surrey. For make no mistake, sir, Molly and Tenbrooks were the best horses, and I include our famous Kentucky racehorses here too, ever seen in Boone County, Kentucky.

Naturally, when I told the Judge that, I never in all my days expected that the two of them would die within six hours of each other. After it happened, Mr. Harrison called Doctor Murray; yes, the one who helped in delivering all of Molly's foals and he said it was certainly very strange, but nothing more than the coincidence of two horses happening to die of old age on the same day. I myself, considering how Molly and Tenbrooks were raised together and lived like a human husband and wife for all these years, don't exactly agree with Doctor Murray. It's so much more likely that Molly, knowing Tenbrooks was gone, couldn't stand the thought of living without him and died herself of a broken heart.

Whatever, for the last two days since they died, I've been thinking about not wanting any horse but Molly or Tenbrooks to be pulling the surrey. Finally, I talked it over with the Judge and we decided that if we started harnessing one of their children that it would be practically the same as with Molly and Tenbrooks. So Abraham's down at the barn now, getting Speckled Jerry harnessed and when he's ready, he'll bring him around front and, after we finish with our lemonades, we'll all go for a nice long ride down alongside the river.