

THE BACKSIDE

Rain drenched the beautifully landscaped lawn of Belmont Park, generating a large mush pit of mud. The dreariness of the day blended colors of the red brick building covered in green ivy into a graying brown. All of the grandeur and color of the park was washed away, leaving the park an abysmal setting that hinted at something unclean.

For sports photographer Janey O'Neil the overall dreariness of the day suited her mood and the rain did very little to wash away her melancholy. She thought a day out of New York City would do wonders for her outlook and she believed the trip to Belmont Park would incite the spirit of adventure and creativity. Instead she found more gloom.

Many saw only the glamour of horseracing — the owners in pinstriped suits, wives and daughters in cotillion dresses, bonnets and bright shining horses with jockeys dressed in silk. Grand racing festivities were held with a spectacle of flowers and spirits. But like any world, there was another side and in horseracing this side was appropriately called the backside.

A chain-linked fence barred spectators, for it was here the deals were made, the betting lines drawn and the conditions divulged. Here in the backside all the secrets of the race were kept, like a great treasure of knowledge sealed in a fortress. Many in the gambling world sought inside knowledge in order to gain leverage against the competition. For Janey, it was mere journalistic endeavor and the means to research her assignment. She cared little for the race and for all those involved.

A sign displayed a warning of the restricted area and rang the bell. Janey rang the bell and waited. Then a hardened curly haired woman whose age was difficult to guess greeted Janey on the other side. "This is a restricted area."

Like many in her profession, Janey flashed her press pass as if the little card

granted her access to the greatest mysteries of life. “I’m here to meet Rick Valencia. He is expecting me. I’m Janey O’Neil with *Sport News Magazine*.”

The woman opened the gate for Janey. “I’ll tell Mister Valencia you are here.” She handed Janey a clipboard. “In the meantime, please sign in here.”

Janey signed her name and then studied her surroundings. She grew mesmerized while watching a young female rider rinse down a black horse. The water from the glistening horse vaporized into the air. Janey snapped a picture of the horse with the ghostly mist rising from its body.

It was the truth and the perspective of being in the moment that attracted Janey to photography. From behind the lens of the camera, she saw so much more of life than through normal vision. She saw what people actually were, not what they pretended to be. In that moment, truth was captured which no one could hide. She longed for reality in all aspects of life — her job and especially her love.

There was something seedy about horseracing that appealed to Janey’s aesthetic dark side. For years she had covered professional team sports in all their grandeur and spectacle and on one special occasion she had the opportunity to shoot the US Open. Upper class sports, such as tennis were never her scene. Ironic since she was raised by a mother who not only dated and married every rich, eligible bachelor in New York City but also her mother wrote novels about her sordid relationships. This was probably what lured Janey to the dark side of life. It was her life since childhood.

She gazed downward at her scraped leather boots and at her feet saw a pile of manure. She raised her camera, took a picture and then stepped over the mound. She grinned wickedly thinking what a contribution that picture would be to her portfolio, or perhaps she would frame it and give it to her mother as art. Janey loved to spite her mother. It was one of the things that gave her the greatest joy in life.

A mechanical arm guided three horses around a small circle. The device gave new sadistic meaning to the phrase, “merry go round.” One of the horses rebelliously tugged on its lead and stuck out its tongue as it trotted along. Janey raised her camera, took a few snapshots and then stuck her tongue out at the horse. She wondered if the horses ever got tired and wanted to break free, or were they content to go round and round?

She hated herself for the mood she found herself. “Love,” she thought was not much different than the wicked mechanical device that guided these horses. Sometimes in love and life she felt lead round and round, unable to break free from her emotions and physical attachments many call love.

“That is a hotwalk,” a man whispered softly in her ear. His breath was warm and sent a chill down her spine.

Janey turned around and was nearly dumbstruck by a very attractive looking man dressed to kill ladies and perhaps even some men. The man smiled seductively and took Janey’s hand. “I’m Rick Valencia, the track’s marketing manager.”

“Janey O’Neil.” She removed her hand from Rick’s grasp and stepped back, uncomfortable with his ever so slight and suave seduction; definitely a man who was always on the make.

“I met with your colleague David Brakus yesterday.” Rick leaned toward Janey.

“It is a shame you could not join us.”

“Knowing David, I’m sure you got along fine without me.”

“He’s a good reporter. He’s definitely got the gift of the gab. A lot of the trainers and riders don’t like talking to reporters, but he chatted with everyone like a storm.” Rick studied Janey carefully. “You seem a little more reserved.”

“I let David do all the talking. That’s the deal with the partnership. He does the interviews and writes the articles. I take the pictures.”

“So you’re okay letting a man do all the talking.”

“Photographers let their images speak for them.”

“That makes sense.” Rick escorted Janey along a path of straw and ground up mud that lead to the shed row. “Is there anything in particular you would like to see?”

“I’m just getting a feel for everything.”

“Okay then, I’ll give you the grand tour.” Rick stopped at the end of the stable and demonstrated a whiteboard with black marker scribbles. “Every morning the trainers write the workouts for each horse. The riders prepare the horses for their workouts and then follow the instructions listed on the board. Depending on the horse’s racing schedule some of these work outs will be a breeze — others will have sprint workouts.”

Janey took a quick photograph of the board and then pressed on behind Rick. She peeked inside all the stalls where the racehorses were kept; some were quiet and demure careless of her presence, while other horses stepped to the front of stall to get scent of Janey. She was new to their world and even the horses were keen to her being a neophyte in the world of horse racing.

“Let me show you their workouts,” Rick said with his hand pressed on her back.

They walked toward the back entrance of the racetrack. He pointed to a small office with pieces of paper randomly taped to glass windows. Men of short stature and wiry frames waited anxiously outside.

“That’s the track office. They plan the day’s races, who races, who rides, the purses and the odds of each race.”

The jockeys studied Janey as she passed. As jockeys have learned how to sense a horse during a race, they all sensed her. They looked at her as they could tell she grew tired, her mind and body ached in the struggles of finding the truth in her relationship. They all seemed to know her race had been very hard and she was ready to give up. Janey forced a confident smile at the jockeys. They knew she was faking.

Rick escorted her up the steps of a platform and joined several trainers and owners—men immaculately dressed in suits, others attired as cowboys with cowboy hats and others in sweatpants and gold chains. The men timed the horses’ sprints with stopwatches.

The men timed a gray horse that sprinted below on the track. “That was Jumping Johnny,” Rick whispered to Janey. “He’ll be running in the Belmont Stakes. He’s a bit of a long shot.” He pointed to a chocolate brown horse galloping around the near turn. “Charitable Gentleman, he is a very good horse. Good things are expected him.”

Janey followed the horses through the lens of her camera. She saw a jet-black horse galloping around Charitable Gentleman, tugging hard on the reins. “What’s his

name?”

“Kiss Me Deadly,” Rick answered with a slick grin. “A potential spoiler.” He paused for a moment to check out Janey and then continued. “A lot of what they’re doing this morning is called *breezing*. The rider holds firmly onto the reins as he controls the horse in an easy gallop. From this they test the horse’s character and professional readiness.”

Janey snapped a few photographs of Kiss Me Deadly as he galloped past and then turned to Rick with an inquisitive stare. “Professional readiness?”

“The rider senses whether the horse obeys their commands, or if the horses want to run free. A horse’s professionalism is determined by its willingness to follow the rider’s lead and not run its own race.”

“Huh.” She spotted a lone rider sitting on a horse at the backside entrance to the track. “What does that guy do?”

“He’s the runner. He chases down a horse if it bolts.”

Bolting was something she had felt like doing many times, way too often in fact. These days, however, she felt ridden hard and did not have the spirit to run free. “Do many horses bolt?”

“Not many, but you could imagine how hard it must be to chase them down. Usually the runner rides after the horse until the horse tires out. It is really the only way you can catch them.” He gave Janey a flirtatious grin. “It is how some men seduce women. They keep wooing until the woman grows tired of the advances and finally gives into a date.”

Janey looked at Rick curiously. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” he said with a wink. “Horse racing is like love. Many come out of the gate quickly, fast and furious. They may break from the pack and appear as the sure favorite to win, but they usually end up losing steam. The winner of the race, and of love, is the one with endurance to watch the race throughout the middle to learn when to make a move and when to hold back. Finally, when the others tire and fade, there is the chance for a winning finish.”

As riders breezed their horses below on the track, Rick’s words breezed through Janey’s mind. “It’s the ones with the greatest endurance that win the race. Quitters never win in really any aspect of their life-work, play or love.” *But how do you know if you’re in a race that you just can’t win or isn’t even worth running? When do you decide to train for another event?*

Rick gently took her arm in his. “Let me introduce you to some of our ladies.”

As they proceeded back toward the shed row saddled up horses and riders paraded before her to and from the track. Janey noticed the horses with their legs taped like an athlete, dreading a day’s workout. Rick tugged at her arm and pulled her away from her reflection into the stables.

The soulful gaze of a grey appaloosa filly drew Janey’s attention to the expression of the horse-longing, helpless gaze, desperately wanting to be freed from running the race. She raised her camera lens level with the horse’s eyes and took a picture. “What’s her name?”

“Her name is Stella.” Rick rubbed the horse between the eyes. “She does all right. She’s not much of a competitor, but she comes from a good pedigree. Perhaps she’ll give birth to the next Triple Crown winner.” Rick stroked the neck of a beautiful black mare. “This is Queen Anne, my favorite. She is very spry and spirited.” He winked at Janey. “She also bites so mind your fingers.”

Janey never spent much time with horses and never appreciated how expressive and honest creatures they were. All the horses in the stable and leashed to the hot walks demonstrated such striking personalities that in many cases outshined the personalities of people. Here in the strange world of the backside, they worked, trained, ate and slept just like the multitudes of population living in the city.

“What would you say to people who find horse racing abusive and harmful to the animals?”

Rick gave ample attention to his favorite mare. “Men don’t spend millions of dollars and hours of dedication on creatures we don’t love.”

“Love?” Janey questioned with sarcasm.

He guided her outside where several groomers attended horses, washing them with a hose, brushing their coat with soft dandy brushes until their muscles glistened. Groomers combed and clipped their manes, examined their eyes and nostrils examined, tapped legs and cleaned hooves.

“These horses receive the very best care. They are groomed daily, washed, worked out. They have the best veterinary care and their hooves and shoes are checked daily. You need to think of these animals as professional athletes.”

All the magnificent looking horses — shiny, lean and muscular reminded her of boyfriend Dwayne Schuster, safety for the New York Jets. She was well of aware of the hardship his body endured daily and the physical therapy he received daily to counteract the stress. Strange to her that race horses and football players displayed similarity. And the way these horses pranced about with their heads held high upon majestic bodies, she had no doubt these horses, like football players felt their own supremacy. She wondered if all the little ponies hang around outside the backside gates like they do at the gates of the Meadowlands.

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A light wind blew gray overcast clouds above the gleaming white New York Jets training facility in Florham Park, New Jersey. Inside the locker room with green carpeting and mahogany lockers, large muscular men prepared for the day’s workout, by patching bruises and taping small wounds on their knuckles.

In the trainer’s room Dwayne Schuster, wearing shorts, compression top and a backwards baseball cap slid onto an examining table and extended his right leg for a trainer, who secured his ankle with white tape. Dwayne winced slightly as the pain radiated through his ankle and up his calf.

“Okay?” the trainer asked.

Dwayne used to love the pain associated with his sport. It was all part of the battle and was a testament to his toughness. Now ten years in league the pain was a nuisance. In his younger days he popped vitamins, nowadays it was painkillers. He didn’t complain.

The pain was a small price to pay for being a player in the NFL, a job he thoroughly enjoyed.

Dwayne tried to turn his ankle “I can’t feel my foot.”

The trainer started to tape Dwayne’s left knee. “Then it’s good.”

An assistant coach stopped by the doorway. “Schuster, I want you to work out with the rookie today.”

“Sure, thing coach,” he yelled back as the trainer taped his left index and middle fingers together.

Joel Remington, Dwayne scoffed to himself, the top drafted safety this year and runner up to the Heisman Trophy-six four, two hundred and twenty pounds of muscle and runs a four forty in the forty-yard dash. Remington led the Big 12 Conference with sixty-six tackles and five interceptions. Dwayne had all the stats on the kid. And to make matters worse, he had to train with the kid.

The trainer wrapped an ace bandage around Dwayne’s right shoulder. “Remington was here at six, working out in the weight room.”

Dwayne rotated his shoulder to test the bandage. “Of course he was. I think there was a time when even I worked out at six in the morning. Now there are better things to do at six in the morning.”

One his fellow teammates chuckled. “Yeah man, I know what you mean, but that too is conditioning.”

“I don’t know what you were doing at six. But I was sleeping.”

“Man, you *are* getting old,” another teammate teased Dwayne.

“I’m just pacing myself. I have a whole lifetime of lovemaking and living. I can’t do it all in one morning.” He winked at his teammates. “Not every morning, that is.”

He jumped off the examining table favoring his weak ankle. He limped a few steps before walking. He had to mentally prepare himself before meeting the rookie on the field, rid himself of all vulnerability so he could find the kid’s weakness and figure how to exploit it.

Outside a light rain fell over the grassy field where the players warmed up. Remington, the energetic rookie moseyed casually toward Dwayne with a grin. He noticed Dwayne’s taped knee. “Hey man. Hope it’s not serious.”

“Nope,” Dwayne replied quickly and looked past the kid as if deemed insignificant.

The coach blew the whistle to begin practice. For most of the morning Dwayne was paired against the young rookie who out sprinted Dwayne on the ladder and between the cones. Dwayne had great difficulty keeping up with the rookie on the sprint workouts.

Mostly Dwayne was smoked by the kid, but he casually laughed it off. “Kid, you’re never going to make it through the end of practice if you don’t ease up.” The rookie just grinned, knowing he had the veteran on the run.

Dwayne knew however there was a lot more to the position than strength and speed. His opportunity to exploit the kid’s weakness came during the afternoon scrimmage. Ten years as a safety in the NFL, Dwayne learned that the key not only for success, but also for survival was reading offensives and knowing the opponents plays

before they had a chance to call them.

During the afternoon scrimmage, Dwayne was on point for nearly every tackle and even intercepted the quarterback twice. The rookie watched from the sideline, waiting for his chance to impress the coaches. He understood the game and he had already impressed at the Combine. He was ready to make his mark and show up the old guy who appeared to be broken.

A whistle blew. "All right, let's switch to the second team in the backfield," the coach instructed.

Dwayne and the first team linebackers jogged off the field. Dwayne removed his helmet and ran his hand through his sweaty longish, dark hair. He squirted water into his mouth as he watched his competition take his position center field. The quarterback snapped the ball. The wide receiver ran an in-and-out. The rookie showed off his athletic prowess by out-sprinting the wide out and missing the play completely.

Dwayne clapped loudly. "Way to go Remington! Keep it up!"

The rookie tried hard, too hard. He outran every receiver, over extended on the running plays and had a difficult time knowing where the ball was. He wasn't at Kansas State any more. This was the big league and he was showing little league poise.

The first team linebacker nodded toward Dwayne. "Kid keeps showing off like that, he'll be a contender for the practice squad."

The coach blew the whistle to end the scrimmage. "All right, take a warm down lap."

The rookie ran up to meet Dwayne who breezed around the track in a slow jog with the linebackers. "Dude, you must be physic. It's like you can read the quarterback's mind."

Dwayne grinned. "Well kid, all the speed in the world isn't going to help if you can't find the play."

Just like that, Dwayne drained all the youthful exuberance of the young rookie. He walked off the track and fell into the grass to stretch. He watched the wind blow dark ominous rain clouds across the sky. He wondered: How much time did he have until he was finally out to pasture?

Suddenly, his youth flashed before him; the games, the parties and the women. "To be considered old at thirty," he chuckled to himself as he quickly banished his negative thoughts. He glanced over at the rookie and assured himself, "*I still got it.*"

As they headed back to the locker room, Dwayne's attention was drawn to several women checking out their team's practice. "Good day ladies," he said as he jogged by.

Remington followed at Dwayne's footsteps. "Ladies."

The women, having no idea who Remington was, paid him no attention. The rookie knew he needed introductions into this world and followed Dwayne into the locker room. "Are there going to be women like that at the event tonight?"

"Always."

Remington grinned eagerly. "Man, do you think you could hook me up?"

Dwayne put his arm around the rookie's shoulder pads. "Pursuing women is like playing safety in the NFL. You have to watch them, know their moves before you make

yours. If you show off too much, you'll lose your shot faster than that wide out who beat you to the ball." He patted Remington on the shoulder. "I'm not sure you're ready yet for the big time ladies."

He grinned and ducked into the training room leaving Remington to suck up his pride. Once out of sight of the rookie, Dwayne limped to the table and cringed with pain as the trainer removed the shoulder pads over his sore shoulder.

"Bravo," the trainer said. "Well played."

Dwayne winced as he stretched out his shoulder. "The game has just begun."

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Janey waited for the train back to the city. Surprisingly, it was a very inspiring day. Even more ironic it was the racehorses that gave insight to her relationship. She reached inside her backpack for her phone and called him.

With a white towel wrapped around his waist, Dwayne opened his locker and reached for his phone. Immediately he recognized Janey's number "What's happening hot stuff?"

A smile crossed Janey's face as she waited on the platform for the F train to lower Manhattan, her boots caked in mud and her jeans covered in dust. She relished in her filth, but could not wait to take a steaming hot shower. "I'm on the subway back from Belmont. I was just thinking of you and wanted to know if you wanted to get dinner?"

"Tonight's that charity event I told you about." He looked up and saw his teammates waving their hands in defiance.

"Come on dude. Leave the broad at home," a teammate said

"Yeah man, there's going to be models," another stated.

Dwayne paused when he saw the rookie, Remington waiting for his response. Socially, the team was split down the middle, the married men and the bachelors. For many years, Dwayne had always been the team's celebrated bachelor. Now he found himself down that slippery slope of commitment with Janey. He didn't want to disappoint her, or his buddies, so he straddled the fine line being exactly what they wanted from him without crossing either line. He was successful, or so he thought.

He leaned into his locker to stifle the conversation from his teammates. "Hey sweetheart, none of the other guys are taking dates. So you know it's just going to be the guys. Why don't you hang out with the girls and I'll stop by later tonight. Okay?"

"Oh, okay, sure." Janey hung up the phone. She hid her disappointment by convincing herself that seeing him later tonight was enough.

As the train pulled into the station she saw her reflection in the mirror. She was a mess, her hair frayed from her ponytail and mud splattered on her face. Her appearance did very little for her confidence, as every stop more and more attractive women boarded the train and looked at Janey as if she were a derelict. She couldn't wait to get home and wash herself clean.