



***Accounting, installment #10.***

*by Joell Dunlap - all rights reserved by the author 2018*

The Los Angeles traffic slowed to an afternoon crawl. She rested her head on the steering wheel and tuned into the DJ on the radio.

Recently, she'd switched from music to talk radio. The LA music scene had become tiresome. Her latest obsession was a talk show about sex and relationships. The show was hosted by a smart psychologist and a smart-ass comedian. The people who called in ranged from 14-year-olds calling in on a dare, to attention starved semi-celebrities hoping to shock the public into talking about them. Occasionally, there would be some interesting, legitimate questions.

Radio Host: "J in Newport Beach, you're on the air."

"Um, thanks for taking my call (sobs). I just can't do this. I can't stand hurting him like this."

Comedian Radio Host: "Well use a little lube why don't ya?" (laughs at his own joke)

Psychologist Radio Host: "J? Tell me why you think you're hurting him."

"I can't make him happy, I'm such an asshole. I can't keep doing this."

Comedian Radio Host: "Well duh daddy-o, just stop being such a jerk. Whaddya do; cheat on him?"

Psychologist Radio Host: "Okay J, calm down, let's talk about why you are feeling like this."

The voice was unmistakably Johnny's.

In this valley brimming with of millions of people, there was no doubt in her mind. He was exhausted and frayed like she'd never heard him. Her mind flashed on her commitment not to take his call and she moaned. She grabbed her phone to check to see if she had missed any of his or Mark's calls. She hadn't. Little relief.

"Look, I'm sorry I called. I'm just a mess. I have to go." J clicks off choking on sobs.

Comedian Radio Host: "Dude, he's a mess. Sounds like he needs a weekend in Palm Springs."

Psychologist Radio Host: "He's really hurting. J, if you can hear me, call the radio station back and I'll talk to you privately." He sounded worried.

Ann dialed Johnny's number to no avail, the same with Mark.

Jeezus, how did I get pulled back into this? I just need to go home and do some billing work on the computer, have a glass of wine, a salad and at least six hours of sleep. Is that too much to ask?

Her pleading to a God she quit believing in years ago seemed pathetic at best. If only she could be like her mom and go to a church, light a candle, say a decade or two of a rosary, spend some time on her knees praying and feel like she'd done everything she could do. She hadn't thought to envy her mom in a long time.

Her mind wandered back to the days when her mom forced her to dress up and go to Mass on Sundays. By the time she was 13 years old, her brother was driving and they both conspired on Sundays to tell their mom that they were going to later Mass on Sunday afternoon. They would shower and get dressed, pile into his 1968 Mercury Cougar and drive directly to the back of the town park to smoke dope and listen to loud music. It was deliciously wicked. Maybe, if she would have attended church, she'd have the tools to help her figure out how to untangle her messy life. Her mother certainly thought so.

In due time, she pulled into the carport of her little duplex. It was the place she had called home for over four years. She thought briefly about swinging by Peter's to pick up Luke, but the thought of talking with one more person, even if it was Peter, was more than she could imagine. She noticed the un-mown lawn and the weeds that had started to grow through the cracks in the driveway. Mateo always did the gardening and now there was one more thing she needed to add to her list of things to get done. Maybe she could talk the neighbor kids into taking on the job.

Placing her keys on the ring by the door, she surveyed the tidy space that she called home. It wasn't stylish, it wasn't fancy, but it was hers. Her books on the shelf, a hodgepodge of mysteries, westerns and a few treasured poetry books thrown in were neatly arranged around the battered, second hand couch covered with her grandmother's crocheted blankets.

The middle of the couch was permanently indented with the shape of a resting Luke. It was his favorite place. The kitchen was sparse – the kitchen of someone who doesn't cook. It was clean and orderly and she could find those things she regularly needed with ease. She opened the shades that kept her place dark and cool against the unforgiving Los Angeles sunshine.

The place smelled musty and close, so she opened the windows of the kitchen and promptly closed them when she realized the dearth of noise from the roads, the lawnmowers and a teenaged neighbor's blast of Hip Hop music that the windows let in. She placed her bag, along with tomorrow's Racing Form newspaper on the table and thought about the several hours worth of billing work that she'd need to complete before bills needed to go out on Tuesday the first of the month. If she really wanted to take Monday afternoon off, then tonight was her best bet.

She opened the freezer and selected one of a dozen frozen meals, popped it into the microwave and went to the cupboard to treat herself to a glass of wine. She hesitated and opted for three fingers of Silver Tequila. It had been a hell of a day.

She ventured back to her computer and started up her accounting and spreadsheet programs. Bookkeeping was relaxing to her. Making all of the receipts and bills fit into their respective slots, recording and categorizing them was restful and meditative. All the columns added up if you were careful and if they didn't, there was a good reason for it that you could solve if you were diligent. At the end, things were neat and finished and absolute.

She'd worked her way through lean times by straightening out the books of farriers and the tax problems of exercise riders.

Organizing the lives of others was simple and gratifying.

### **Roxy**

Another early morning began with bad coffee and the quiet work of carefully unwrapping Thoroughbred legs from their night bandages. Carefully running her hands over the joints, sinews and bones – hoping to see the future. Determining whether each horse needed more or less training miles, different medication or shoes, quiet turn-out or challenging racing. Each leg had a story to tell if you listen with your fingers.

The luxurious quiet was soon shattered by the whistling of would-be hot-walkers appearing early to look for work. Ann referred them to Enrique but the quiet time she yearned for was

clearly over. The horses were shuffling around – sensing the onset of another busy morning. They pawed the ground demanding that their grooms bring the one can of oats that they would eat before training hours began.

Ann brushed the straw off her knees and headed to the office to put on her galloping equipment. On her way she stopped to make a couple of changes to the workout schedule on account of her findings this morning. She crossed off Vaya Con Dios' name from the Racing Today list and her heart was heavy.

On a rare, sentimental whim, she detoured to find him, fished out a couple of peppermints from her jeans pocket and ducked into his stall. He was resting along the back wall in the darkest corner. It was as if he wanted to sleep in and somehow knew that change was in the air. He halfheartedly nickered to Ann. His velvety dark brown coat looked like a seal freshly out of a wet ocean. It shone, even in the dark. The tiny snip of white between his nostrils, the only white on his large brown body contrasted sharply in the dark.

He took the peppermints from her hand then swung his head back into the corner of the stall and crunched them slowly. It's the posture of a horse that hurts. Head down and turned away, tail still and low, sulking in the dark.

“Hey big man, I know you feel like sh\*t. I had it all planned out. You were headed up to a quiet little spot and by fall, you would be trotting down the trails with the kids, fat and shaggy. You wouldn't even remember pounding down an old racetrack.” Ann stroked his neck and he continued to ignore her.

“Well you old bastard, you are probably going to prove me wrong. You're probably going to head to Cramer's barn and run a hole in the wind. You just might love working for that barn.”

Viya Con Dios made no effort to comfort her. He only swallowed the peppermint, exhaled loudly and stared blankly into the dark corner.

“Why do I do this?,” she asked herself out loud.

“Because you are an idiot,” crackled a gravelly voice from outside the stall.

“Sh\*t Roxy, how long have you been standing there?,” asked Ann.

“Long enough to see you get gaga over an old cripple like that,” Roxy replied while applying sparkly pink Chapstick SPF 30 on her windburned lips. “I heard you need some gallop help. Can I get on a few for you today?”

“You, gallop for us? What’s up?” Ann asked, surprised.

“Tony and I are on the outs and I moved out last night, so I’m officially looking for work.” Roxy was laughing, not crying.

“You guys will be back together before the third race.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But this morning, you need help and I need to show that asshole that I can ride for anyone I goddamn well please.”

“How many can you get on for me today?”

“How many you got, girlie?”

Roxy, tall and lanky, drank hard, swore harder and rode beautifully. It was going to be a good day.

## April 2019 - A Damn Fine Hand

Written by by Joell Dunlap - all rights reserved by the author 2018  
Thursday, 28 March 2019 23:56

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*Author Joell Dunlap lives in Half Moon Bay with her husband, some smelly old hound dogs and 19 rescued and donated horses - most of them OTTBs. She is the founder and executive director of The Square Peg Foundation ( [www.squarepegfoundation.org](http://www.squarepegfoundation.org) ). You can subscribe to read weekly installments of A Damn Fine Hand here:*

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