

Bill Bradd
Mendocino, CA
95460

THE WAY IT USED TO BE: 1957

Toronto
Old Woodbine Race Track

There's never been enough emphasis on horseracing. If it were only so simple, so quick to the quick, but only in stories. Just getting to the track was sometimes almost beyond him. Let him tell this story.

So there I was in Toronto at this apartment on Bathurst Street, above a shoe repair, Arnolds, a big neon blinked this fact into my front room, seventeen times a minute. I look out the window and I see a VW bus parked in the lot across the street. It's July in the city, tar melts on the streets, the sun is out and I'm low on funds, no prospects and I just finished off a stale beer. I'm grumpy. I see the hippie van and its license plate is four sevens; 7777 Cal.

Hey, that's me, I want to go to California, get outta Toronto and here it was. Four sevens, my lucky day. Arnold shoe repair sign blinked me up to reality. Arnold these days is a Chinese guy who does a brisk trade in dried turtles on a stick; they seem to disappear from the front window with rapidity. Anyway this neon sign blinks on, my head snaps to reality, no money. There's a woman on the radio singing let the mystery be. No way how do you think we got out of the swamp, out of the foothills, the tundra, with mosquito bushes and black bear berries. I need the race track today. Let the investigation begin.

I move down the street rapidly, post time is one-thirty, and past noon now and it's a half hour on the streetcar, out to Woodbine race track, Sherbourne and the bleak alley. I go into the Foxes Corner, a little bar, dark with red candle ashtrays, half of them smoldering. I peer around in the murk, nobody, back to sunlight. I drink two espressos from the guy on the corner, on the tab of course and time is passing. I know now what has to be done. Mr. Organmaster who loans money out of the Bridge and Social Club above the bicycle store.

Mr. Organmaster is a very large man, with glasses thick as coke bottle bottoms. His people were dangerous I'd heard, but he, himself always seemed to be enjoying some private joke.

I see him. He is frowning at me. I back off from the fifty and now begin to tell the truth a little bit. I say about the VW bus and all. He snorts, his lips chatter like a race horse. I take this as a good sign. He wants to know if I want to sing with some group he's putting together to do sea shanties out in the suburban bars. I can sing. Yes, yes of course I will

sing sea shanties out in any soulless place, just put me in your book. Ten bucks? Okay, okay, I gotta go.

I'm squared up at the streetcar stop waiting for the King Street car. Larry Bird says you play defense with your feet. I'm squared up, there's a bunch of us, all waiting for the King Street Car, all headed for an afternoon of horse racing, a day, to fry under a sun that loved little white heads and their friends. I'm at the front of the mob that's waiting. The crowd's beginning to build. We're jutting out into the street by now. Ah here comes the King Street car. I can see it's already jammed with mommas and poppas and guys who want to move to California. Whiz, goes right past, clanging its bell. We'd surged forward, expecting at least a slow down, but nope, zoom right by me. The last guy in the thing is jammed by the door. He's wearing a beige wool jacket, perhaps too warm for this time of year I thought. Here comes an empty car up the track. I can feel the excitement building behind me but I know something's wrong. Sure enough it turns right up Collieridge Street and goes off empty. The nitwits who run the transit think it's funny to watch us expectant money winners lean forward only to fall back. I can feel a briskness of intent just below knee level. I can say with surely, without fear of contradiction, that people who are waiting at a streetcar stop for the thing to come and take them to the race track where they will undoubtedly have more money than they do at this instant, these people don't want anything unlucky to happen to them on their travels. Already a guy has said, next car will be the third, three's a lucky number for me. And he gave a kind of weak, all right. Three wasn't the favorite number of everybody there though.

We need music. No problem, immediately four boom-boxes open all with different tunes, if it wasn't a m lange, at least it was malevolent. I was humming sea shanties, it might become my thing. "Oh I grabbed up her skirt and much to my surprise." That sort of thing.

Another King car is approaching. It's full up and it clangs past us followed closely by a frazzled looking woman shouting my kid's on that car, she's wheezing and running up the tracks and the King Street car goes on sailing toward the race track. Christ, imagine that...you're going to slip out of the house for a few minutes, grab the kid, hot foot it down to the track, catch a couple of races and be home to have supper on the table by six. And the streetcar runs off with the kid who must be jammed in there somewhere. Meatloaf is really going to be underdone tonight. You see lots of stuff, none of it unlucky.

I'm squared up, my feet are light. Here comes another car, time is passing. Pow. It's empty for us, the nitwits have put an extra car on the line, way to go men. Bam we pile on. I sit where I want, right hand side at the back but close to the rear door, facing the window, which I jerk immediately open. We're not going to make the first race; the daily double players are impatient. It's gong to be close. We fill 'em up and go off.

We now fly by other streetcar stops, all with people running a bit late. Being philosophical about every fly-by was beginning to wear thin. I could tell cause we stopped for a light, I could see them 'em all. They're tapping their feet, Larry Bird's advice was not limited to men. Taxis are becoming more evident as we get nearer the track. Yellow cabs with black writing, "Call Phoenix 7777 for quick dispatch." Hey, I'd a went for it if I wasn't in here with the sweaters and heavy breathers. But it takes two to tango, and that's what makes horseracing, so opinions are expressed Vox Soto. We are wall to wall in a tin streetcar, the temps about ninety-two, no breeze, except when a car passes and dust flies in every window that is open which is every one, and a film of dust covers us all within three blocks. And it sticks to those who are sweating, not necessarily unlucky though.

So Vox Soto people talk, to the newspaper racing form close to their vests. Except for those who don't. They're saving their money for the big hit, after all admission was something, and if all you got's ten bucks well, you can cop a boo at the next guy's form when he's not looking. Only the next guy has been in your position and he hates you so get your own form pal and he curls around his but screw you for making him feel uncharitable, which could be unlucky. What you want is a neutral trip, a bland cast, a no hassle trip over to the track.

So the guy three rows up says to his racing form, "Philistine, good leg there." We all go to the charts immediately. Philistine, out of Morg by Templeton. Early, late and middle leg. I saw what he meant and passed on.

Finally, there's the track. Old Woodbine band stand, a pre-second-war structure, open steel beams and concrete painted in pastel colors. It loomed and cast its shadow over the working class neighbors. There's a mob headed in, time to get off. We pile out, I've wiggled to the front of the back door pile and I'm waiting on the top step to get off first.

I learned how to slide and dodge early, as a kid from the boxing lessons my grandfather inflicted on me. So I'm through the crowd, got my admission in my hand and I'm heading for the ground floor, finish-line spot, where the horse trainers tout the hookers by marking their programs. My girlfriends' sister, Nicole, will be there, maybe she's got a winner.