

I: June, 1959

1/ Come Along

It was an hour after Freddie's dangerous business dinner at the Club Patee with his friend Theo and the stranger Joe Wood from Miami Beach. Freddie Silver and his wife Tomara (accent on the first syllable) talked intimately of it at the Formica table in the duplex's linoleum kitchen, Freddie summing up only parts of the evening's talk for her. The idea of his best buddy Theo Tipton betraying Freddie behind his back, they decided, was nonsense. It was not Theo. If Joe had made Theo nervous during the evening? It was not Freddie's problem. It only showed another side of the polygonal Theo. He, too, might be made weak, vulnerable.

Thirty-eight, Tomara had a pretty face, shiny hair, heavy legs, and a college degree with Honors. It was her nature to be patient and genial.

To her, Freddie said, "I am not a simpleton, nor do I see myself as crooked timber. You know this."

Forty-one, Freddie was thin as a teenager, not having gained a pound in twenty years. It was in the genes, said friends. Freddie dismissed the thought. It was because he was on the go-go-go all the time, eating on the run, couldn't bother to wait outside of a fully-fitted kitchen like his brother Arnold, while his wife Shirley fixed a triple-decker club with two sides. Freddie rather likely spread a thin layer of dark tuna on a slice of plain white bread, slapping it together himself, or fixed himself a margarine sandwich. Freddie was five feet, five inches, his hair light and curly. His eyeglasses were the antique wire-rims worn by his father, a tailor, when he had done close work at the shop. Leaving a red mark, the wire regularly pinched the skin above Freddie's nose. It was uncomfortable. He was therefore constantly taking his glasses on and off to relieve

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the discomfort, too cheap to replace them. Freddie cleaned his glasses at least twice daily, as if to erase the scratches on the lenses.

Freddie and Tomara were in bed minutes later, snuggled under a pale blue sheet. Freddie said, “My plan in the case of this Joe Wood? I do not do business with the guy in the worst of dreams. Yes, I did unfortunately palm the three-thousand dollar advance from him that I mentioned in the kitchen. It was unwise. I also pocketed the gaudy ring *not* from the College of Hard Knocks that he forcefully gifted me. I was caught off-guard. My head was spinning crazily with the terms of the guy’s cagey offer. Not to worry. I have a counterplan to Wood’s not a laundering scheme, whatever we call it,” he said.

Freddie had hatched his scheme in a gambler’s virile imagination. It was prior to the dinner earlier on this night with Theo and the stranger from Miami Beach. He had nurtured it, he believed, in a pragmatic brain. It was to take place on the following Saturday. Freddie had not confided its details to Tomara, had no plans to do so. His talking in bed openly with her like this was unusual, his idiom more formal tonight than his usual quiet patter. Tomara tickled his chest and tummy, listening to the thoughts of a man that might unpredictably read any section of the Sunday Times that caught his fancy on that morning.

Freddie stepped into Iggy’s Shoeshine Parlor in downtown Wagonquett at seven-thirty on the following Saturday. It was three days after his troubled meeting with Joe Wood and then this plain talk with Tomara. He picked up his copy of The Racing Form. He took a shine for a dime and nickel, glancing indifferently through a low porn magazine, until he sighted a nude of a young Negress that resembled the naked young lady he had dealt with in Mobile, Alabama, Mary Belle a few months earlier. She might as well, Freddie told himself, be Marry Belle’s sister.

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

Placing the fifty-cent magazine back in its wooden rack on the near wall, he almost wished he were back there in Mobile now rather than here in Wagonquett.

Back in the duplex, Tomara was folding the day's dry laundry on the bed in their bedroom. Their children, Daniel, twelve, and Nicolette, ten, were in their bedrooms, listening to the radio. Freddie plopped himself onto an aging but sleek, aquamarine cloth couch in the duplex's small living room. It was a hand-me-down from Shirl. He sipped a dark coffee that burnt his stomach, laboring through the numerical charts in the Racing Form, the tables and the daily picks by the equestrian pundits, the speed of each horse in its last three races, taking it all in like an evangelical the words of the Gospels, a yeshiva bücher the text of the Torah, as if they were mystics the presence of the divine. That's how it felt to Freddie. He suddenly was distracted from his study, however, by a tapping sound on the duplex's single front window. It was a raspy sound, was greatly annoying him. Freddie lifted a studious head from the Racing Form's many facts, its figures, and its copious commentary. It was nine-thirty in the morning, he had been involved in his review of the data for two hours now. When Freddie located the source of the tapping noise, like Poe's hero the beating heart, it was Rabbi Popkin scratching on the single windowpane that fronted the Silver's half of the duplex.

Popkin smiled at Freddie with a set of large teeth. It was warm smile. He was waving a black umbrella. The rabbi wore an army-green raincoat, Freddie noticed, with a red carnation in its top buttonhole. Freddie lowered his neck, flopping his head. He meant sternly to ignore the rabbi's busy hands gesturing at him, he was staring instead directly at the Racing Form with the information he needed to make the smart bet at the track today. He was to keep his eyes on it for an eternity, he told himself, if it called for. It was no mystery why the rabbi was here. Trucking to the synagogue was not in Freddie's plans on this Saturday, though, and it surely was why

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

Popkin had come around to fetch him. Freddie gingerly lifted his head, raising his eyes from the Racing Form. He looked to the front window. The rabbi had vanished into the morning sunlight there like a living golem.

Freddie had made his picks for the day's races by noon, examining the data long enough. The seventh race was a sure thing. His calculations agreed perfectly, he was confident, with Theo's inside tip. Theo had first mentioned it to him at the duplex weeks earlier. It was a thank-you gift from one of the jockeys at the Downs today for a legal favor from Theo. The horse was named Come Along, going off at nine-to-one. Nine-to one handed Freddie, he told himself, exactly the money he needed to square himself all around, and then a little extra. He envisioned himself standing by the Winner's Circle after the seventh, having cashed in on Come Along. He would lean on the white railing, staring affectionately at the track's grassy infield, while he gripped the day's winnings in hand. With it, he repaid Arnold his three grand, squared himself with Joe Wood. He was also immediately to mail back the too symbolic ring to the long-legged punk with his dry Panama hat. He then split the rest of the winnings between Sam Gedoff at the loan office, Tomara, and the overdue accounts at Wagonquett Waste, keeping back enough for himself to play the Little Rhody Cup on July fourth.

Freddie edged through a creaky turnstile at Lincoln Downs, the local horse track an hour later. He had the three thousand in cash from Joe Wood stashed in a front pants pocket next to the Ace comb. Freddie would touch as little of it as possible. This was the plan. It was stakes money only -- emphasize only. It was the day's start-up dough, nothing more, a kitty. He expected to hit a winner early in the afternoon with any luck, playing then with the track's money and not with Wood's filthy bribe, multiplying his stake's money on this windless afternoon, the eternal optimist told himself, heading for the grandstand's cement steps. If it might unfortunately

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

happen that he hits the *shnides* in the early races, he busts his beehive of a brain against an immovable wall of plain bad luck? Not to worry. Today he had a safety net. It was secured, was knotted to its tethers, was absolutely reliable. It was right money. It was the protection and the insurance policy of Theo's tip in the seventh race.

Nothing at the track is a sure thing? When Theo Tipton has a jockey in his legal pocket at Lincoln Downs in the spring of 1959, it is a sure thing. This fortuitous set-up did not happen often. It happened once, maybe twice a year. It was about to happen. You were able to count on it as surely as on death and taxes. Hush! The tip's source? The man from Kokomo.

Freddie paid a vendor in the grandstand his twenty-five cents for a copy of today's official racing program, when he normally scrounged a discarded copy from the grandstand floor. Today Freddie had to be sure immediately that Come Along was running in the seventh and not scratched from the race. The program confirmed it. The horse was running, while a promising filly with the name of The Vanity o' Hum'n Wishes was scratched from the race, Freddie read in the program, taking his seat in the grandstand's top row. A three-year-old Florida horse with the name of Sun o' God was racing in its place. Freddie stared at the flashing tote-board at the center of the oval track. The odds on Sun o' God were listed there at thirty-to-one. Freddie checked the three-year old's running line in the glossy program he had gripped in a sweaty hand. It was the middle of June, sunny, eighty five degrees.

The betting line on Sun 'o God had dropped to twenty-to-one by now, the numbers flashing wildly on the tote board. The official program told Freddie the horse's times were contradictory, were radically different in its last two races. It more than intrigued him. A shock of electricity hurried through his small body like the hot, sexual buzz of Tomara's feverish kisses, he recalled, when he lusted after her at the age of twenty-three. The numbers in the recent racing history of

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

Sun o' God tickled a gambler's refined sense of risk. They were sparkling with the illumination of the good fairy in a children's storybook, when it emerges from a dark closet to hover benevolently above a sleeping child. Freddie had met with these odd contradictions in the Florida horse's recent start-to-finish pattern only twice in his twenty years at the Downs. He had made a killing on each of these sublime occasions.

What was the magical pattern, the trope that Freddie had picked up? It involved three components. An off-track horse was running locally in its third race of the year. Bingo! It was the case. The puzzle's second piece? Slow start, quick finish. The Florida horse had dragged through the first quarter of its opening race here four weeks ago, but rallied hard, closing fast by gaining twelve lengths in the last quarter to leave the rest of the field behind. It fit, exactly, the golden pattern. Third piece. The horse ran the reverse race in its outing two weeks ago. Early foot, slow finish. It had barreled to the lead with thrusts of an enormous early speed, pushing to the front by ten lengths as if it a Derby contender, holding the lead past the three-quarter pole before it dragged to a crawl down the home stretch.

The horse flip-flopped in every other race. This was the key to the pattern. It ran cold, hot. Hot, cold. The third race was to combine the best of the previous two! Early foot, strong finish! It all fit together, if not perfectly, Freddie told himself, then like a dodecahedron a circle. Freddie sensed his bet. He was to play Sun o' God in the seventh. It was oil in the can. He was to play the horse only, however, if he hit a run of winners in the earlier races, playing then with the track's money. Lady Luck, Dame Fortune, was to love him today. The wager was hot turkey. It was to capitalize his counter-scheme to Joe Wood's scam when he fondled the track's grimy cash in his brainy hands, Freddie told himself, at nearly four times the pay-off of Theo's horse. The odds on his play of the day had risen back to thirty-to-one. Sitting on a splintery

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

wooden bench at the top of the grandstand, Freddie was feeling a sky high as if he were on an upper, dreaming of his wagers today winning him back at least a part of the really big dough he had lost in south Florida, while also topping off Wagonquett Waste's empty bank account with its payoff. With it, he'd cough up a down payment on a Bess Myerson mink for Tomara, Freddie said out loud, squeezing the stash of one hundred dollar bills in his front pants pocket.

The day's first race was a test of a gambler's know how, and Freddie certainly was dressed for it. He wore Florida his outfit of a pair of white ducks, a short sleeve white shirt hand-embroidered on the back with a parrot and a palm, and a pair of scuffed white bucks. Freddie had Marine Man, the favorite, in the first race. He was not to be argued out of it. Its likely rivals were Doctor Pagnano at four-to-one, Lady Book an Hour at seven-to-one. The Doctor had no bottom, no insides. Lady B. cantered by the grandstand with the posture of Ichabod Crane, stumbling out of the paddock. She was strapped into a pair of oversized dark blinders, her was jockey "Sloppy" Bart Roberts. Roberts was an aging has-been. Riding at the Downs for a dozen years, he exerted a kind of demonic power over the third-rate jocks here with his long tenure as a major domo, bullying the second-rate trainers as well. Roberts had the rigidifying power that long tenure accumulates in a small, self-circumscribed workplace cut off from the outside world and known to be pretty crooked. He fortunately was not riding either Come Along, Theo's horse, nor Sun o' God in the seventh.

The track was fast and dry. There was hardly a breeze. These were the conditions for which Freddie hoped. Marine Man, it appeared, took the first race. Its jockey, Jimsonweed Carry had however cut off the front-runner at the quarter turn, slicing his horse too tightly along the rail. It was a dirty foul, disqualifying the horse.

Was Lady Luck not loving Freddie today? He had dropped five big ones on the first race.

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

Freddie climbed down from the grandstand's cement, and soon was leaning on the white railing thirty feet from the starting gate. Next up was a claiming race of five furlongs, fillies only.

Freddie's horse, Bumblebee Legs, triumphed by a length. He had the winner in the next race with Native Landscape, so the fourth. It was a trifecta. Climbing up to the grandstand, Freddie gripped a mounting stash of cash in his pale hands. He had covered his loss in the first race. He had left it behind, outracing it. When was the last time Freddie Silver had hit three winners in row? He himself was not able to remember. It had been years ago. Freddie pocketed the five hundred he had recouped, sat out the fifth race, won the sixth.

Freddie had a full grand, one thousand dollars in winnings by the time that Theo strutted into the upper grandstand with the cocky step of a high roller at Hialeah. Theo was dressed in the best of the sleek Italian suits he normally wore in court on the first day of a trial. Freddie was more than eager to meet up with his pal. They shook hands, hugged vigorously. A steamy June afternoon had turned warmer. The summer heat intensified the smell of the greasy food sold in the grandstand. It reminded Freddie of the stink of his unpleasant two weeks a while back on Community Ave. The acrid smell of a thousand spilled beers clung to a littered cement floor, while the grandstand hummed like a hornet's nest. Five thousand spectators were here for the seventh race, the day's feature. Its nine barrel-chested horses stepped into the stadium grounds one by one, the grandstand's upper tier throwing an umbrella of a shadow over the silky riders and the silkier horses.

Freddie was not able to stop his skinny legs from rocking back and forth, fingering the two five-hundreds in his pocket like a child clutching his mother's hand. "If the good Lord Himself descended from heaven, sat in the grandstand beside me," Freddie told himself, "He asked me for this money as He asked Abraham for Isaac, I would have to apologize, but refuse Him."

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

Freddie shook Theo's slim hand again. He took a gentle pat on his sweaty back from his track buddy, his good pal of the four decades. They had been playmates during all of early and later childhood in a neighborhood not Wagonquett's finest.

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II. October, 1957

2/ Paradisaic and Eternal Summer

Where there's a will there's is way. It was Freddie Silver's favorite saying. A close second? No risk, no reward.

Freddie was a man with big plans. He was on a quest, and nothing was to stop him. Freddie had telephoned Tomara from his small office at Wagonquett Waste. It was the late morning, the first week in October, eighteen months prior to this June afternoon at the Downs with Freddie about to place a one thousand dollar bet in the seventh race.

Freddie did not much like small talk either on the phone or elsewhere, so he quickly dropped his bomb on Tomara as if he a Pappy Boyington, she Berlin. It came out of the wild blue yonder. He had unloaded his business, Freddie told her, had sold Wagonquett Waste. He was getting his full asking price from his competitor, Larsen. He had written the biggest check of his life to some guys from Great Neck, Luchin and Van Levine, he said next, his voice steady. He was an equal partner with them in a real estate development in south Florida. By the way, he had also quick-saled their always lovely four-bedroom on Searcher Street. The Silvers were moving to Coral Sands, Florida. It was the first Tomara had heard of any of it.

"Standing still is moving backwards," Freddie told her, cold-blooded about it. Tomara let Freddie know how she felt about them shuffling off to Florida. Not happy. It was four hours after his bomb of a phone call. Daniel and Nicolette, eleven and seven, were each in bed, when Freddie and Tomara dropped into a tan leather couch in their large comfortable living room. Life in Wagonquett, she said, was good. She was mistress of a fine home with a large back yard where the neighborhood kids played so nicely. She loved to see them there. She had a generous

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

budget for running the house. The children had friends, they were happy. She had plenty of time to read through her deceased father's library, had the Book Club, her thoughts, and her friendship with Marielle. She was not a climber, never coveted either an upscale mansion in Providence nor dreamed of a Florida condo. She had grown up in Providence, knew it for what it was. Florida, who knew what?

The Silvers moving to Florida?

As if a seasoned Amazon taking on a down-sized Hercules, Tomara has lost the argument before it started, her deep personal strengths useless during this time of peripity. Neither common sense nor sentiment moved Freddie during this turn-around of a hard-headed man, nothing diverted him from his sense of euphoria. He was soaring as high as a B52. Freddie was so excited in the most private of parts, in fact, Tomara had to fight herself from betting him she had conceived a third child, given the sudden frequency of the event. Gambling was not, however, her game, while the daring of the deal absolutely fired Freddie up. The sense of risk quickened his insides. There was, too, a further motive in all this. It was a powerful motive and one more ambitious than either Freddie's desire to quit a small-town Wagonquett or else the lure of riches in Florida. It was, for now, secret. Freddie had not shared it at with anyone, not Tomara, Theo, Arnold, no one. Coral Sands was not only to be his El Dorado, city of gold. It was but a step on a long ladder to a higher goal. The ladder was to be grounded in south Florida where was the glamorous track at Hialeah was less than an hour's drive from Coral Sands. It was to be Freddie's new home away from home during the racing season. Here was racing all year round, Freddie presumed originally, before he looked at its racing calendar. He was thinking not only the weather but the life in south Florida a paradisaic and eternal summer. Never engage in a presumption. It was Theo Tipton's favorite saying, one of his insights into

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman

the unknown. Hiialeah of course had its limited racing seasons like any track, and the heavy tropical rains too often made for a sloppy track.

Freddie and Tomara had been happily married for twelve years, Freddie had mastered affairs in Wagunquett over this time, was as reliable as his Timex. It gained him the confidence and the trust of his college-educated wife. Their life together was clean, comatose. Business at Wagunquett Waste was thriving. It was a success. Within a month of the family high-tailing to south Florida, Tomara smelled a rat or two. Pull out of the deal, she begged Freddie, save what might be saved. Accept his losses, fold his hand, off to Wagunquett. Freddie? He raised his back, went stubborn, froze in the ninety degree heat. This provincial hustler (excuse the language) was over his scheming beehive of a head in the financial waters of south Florida, drowning. He refused a life preserver, Tomara.

They were strolling hand in hand on Coral Sands' white sand beach one evening hand during their fifth week, when Freddie plainly told her, "Trust me. I've got this one made in the shade. You can," he said, "count on me." It was believable. Freddie had kept up the winning record of a front-runner and a strong finisher for a good fifteen years or more in Wagunquett. In Coral Sands? He might've said, "I am so stepped in blood,/ Tis as easy to go forward as to turn back." Freddie waded into the swamps of the Florida real estate business, lost there, refusing to turn back. A similar refusal to minimize his losses hurt Freddie as severely, but more personally more than a year later. He scheduled a lunch with his brother Arnold. Tomara forcefully warned him not to do it. She pulled out her high card. She was to threaten him with the big "or else," or else she moved back to Providence without him, taking the children with her. Did Freddie listen to her? He went right ahead and lunched with Arnold, getting caught up in that nasty incident.

The Man from Florida/JAGoodman