

Racing Time

Chapter 8 of Part V The Speck in Your Neighbor's Eye

“Speedy died in his sleep last night. He died in his sleep.”

Too late. It's too late. I took a break, and now I'm ready to return. It's too late. The door is shut. Locked shut, and bolted. Click. The massive portcullis to the castle of death—thick oak beams bolted together with black wrought-iron hinges and armored bars—has slammed down, shaking the earth, and he is on the other side. I can't hear him. I can't see him. I can't listen to him. There is no longer any point for me to study and research ways for him to get around better. I will no longer be able to read passages from the Bible to him and hear him memorize and recite God's messages one moment and the next hear how he had the most amazing sex with so and so, the grand dame of American steeplechasing, the holiest and highest of socialites, right in the tack room and the sounds she made and what she asked him to do, and I'm saying, “Enough, enough, I really don't want to hear about all that and I don't believe it anyway.”

“Ohhh, she loved it. Ohhhh, she couldn't get enough.”

“OK, that's it. No more for me.”

“What's a matter. We's just two men. Can't we talk like two men?”

Five minutes later. Back to the Bible. Back to Reverend Popoff! Back to his plan of going all the way to Medjugorje, splashing holy water on his eyes, being instantly healed, being able to see again, because he is so pure and good, and what comes around goes around. . . .

He's no longer blind, I think. *Speedy's no longer blind. His spirit has flown off. He's off riding motorcycles with Quinsel waiting to get into the gates of heaven. He's riding: he's galloping Neji, Mako, The Sport, Ancestor across the ridge of the big field at Hydes and picking up speed as he approaches the gates of heaven; he's riding bareback alongside Quinsel his*

brother and Alfonso his nephew—three part-Cherokees, part-Africans; three all-American young men, as American as you can get their family trees going back hundreds of years before the Mayflower, before Columbus, before the Vikings, a shank snapped on one side of the halter and the end tied to the other.

It's a full moon and they're flying across the top of the 100-acre field, schooling head-and-head over the three hurdles. They used to get themselves fired up on a bottle of bourbon, pull the horses out at midnight, school and race them, put them back in the stalls. The next morning Mikey would call out, "Speedy, Speedy—look at this. These horses got all upset about something last night. Look at their coats—they were hot. Did you hear anything last night?"

They don't need the bourbon anymore. All they need is the sharp feel of the withers in their groins, the ribs between their knees, the whipping mane under their hands, the wind whistling past their ears, the feel of flight, of freedom as they fly head and head across the ridge, the moon over their left shoulders, the hurdles coming up....

Speedy's spirit is off and running. He's with his creator and he is creating! "Yes!" as he says it, "Yes-s-s-s-s!" stretching the word out and stressing the sibilance.

He is seated at a long dining room table in the late afternoon with the heaven's northern light coming in a big window that looks out over a green field with a stream running through it and chestnut, bay and gray horses galloping down to the stream and jumping across it.

He's out of the basement from hell and he's in heaven now and the light shines in the big north-facing window and he has an image in his head, a message he wants to deliver. A box of used and worn crayons are by his right hand and he can see them clearly, he can make out every color, the nuance of every shade, they are worn down to the nubs and this is how he likes them. Before him—an old spiral notebook a galloping girl who'd given up on college had given him that he has filled with bright, energetic drawings alluding to Gauguin, Van Gogh, Native American carvings and sculpture, African art, pagan art—the back and front of the pages are covered with naked men and women in Biblical scenes, Garden of Eden scenes, animals, symbols, all this mixed in with drawings from the racetrack. He pushes these old notebooks away and opens the large format sketch pad from heaven with cotton-infused textured paper: clean, clear, no blue horizontal lines of a spiral notebook, no red vertical lines, and he can see the scene he wants to create: bright and lively and with morals—he might just write the moral to make sure it's received—lessons from the Bible, the Bible by his side that he can read, the words

on the page are large and jump out at him with life. He reads aloud and when he gets to an important word he calls it out. The words are alive when he reads them and he translates them into what he sees in his mind and then can see on the page, the people, the animals, alive and breathing. He draws, colors, sketches—fast. He’s Speedy. He knows the Bible. The characters come alive for there he is in heaven and he’s Speedy and he’s going to beat the odds, he’s alive in heaven and may hop on a motorcycle like the one he once had at Saratoga and take off through the clouds with Quinsel.

He’s drawing a Baptism scene. He’s thinking of Jesus—of God—and he imagines himself being “held under by Jesus’s hand”—held under in a river, a deep river in Egypt by “Jesus,” blessed by “Jesus,” saved by “Jesus.” And Jesus is black! He hums. He hums and as he draws the humming breaks into singing.

Take me to the water
 Take me to the water
 Take me to the water
 To be baptized

None but the righteous
 None but the righteous
 None but the righteous
 Shall be saved . . .

I’m going back home, going back home
 Gonna stay here no longer
 I’m going back home, going back home
 To be baptized.

He’s driving a souped-up black Ford Mercury outfitted with glass packs on the dual mufflers—blblblblbbl-spluttter blblblbl-spluttter—he’s flying off, he’s on the road between gigs, it’s 2:30 in the morning and the sedan’s cruising at eighty-five through the clouds, along a Southern highway, no cops in sight, all the rest of the band sound asleep. He has no worries of being pulled over and thrown up against the side of the car by a fat white man in a uniform and being called “boy.” He has no worries of there being no motel they can sleep in, no restaurant they can eat in, no restroom they can use. This highway is long and straight and now the sun is coming up and the band is awakening and the Mercury is cruising. Speedy’s got one hand on the steering wheel and in the other a hot black coffee laced with vodka and they start singing.

Not the rhythm and blues they'll be singing that night at the jazz club but gospel, the gospel they grew up with. As the sun is coming up over the clouds on the eastern horizon, he starts humming Amazing Grace, the sun's rays are shooting through the clouds, the Mercury is flying, the glass packs are purring pbbbpblllll pbbllblllbbbbb ppppp and they take it away, harmonizing, Speedy leading, the car safely flying into the West. No Georgia, South Carolina or Virginia state troopers threatening them if they pull over, threatening them if they drive through the town, threatening them if they do anything beside walk straight to the jazz club. Speedy's voice is soaring higher and the Mercury is flying higher. The Mercury is lengthening, becoming limousine-like and Quinsel's in the back now, Alfonso too; Wayne Gaither has joined up though Speedy never trusted him and knows he robbed my grandmother for years, and Junior Tibbs—his old sparring partner, William Gaskett, the sweetest man who ever worked for the Smithwick Stables, Buba—an old friend, and even Sonny—Sonny Thorton, the only black steeplechase and flat jockey of his time, Sonny who died riding a race at Charles Town—"I told him to hang it up! I told him he was getting too old to ride those bad-legged, raggedy-ass, doped-up Charles Town horses, but he wouldn't listen."

They're packed into the sedan with the members of Fat Boy and the Comets before they became The Soulations, and they're singing. They're flying safely through the heavens with an Army motorcycle escort now, big Harleys, sparking white Harleys on both sides, black Military Police soldiers with brown boots polished to such a shine that they're shooting off sparks, and in front, leading the procession, is the Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama, "a black man, son, a black man!" on a Harley and ain't nobody going to bother them now, they're free free free . . . Rrrmmmmooooonnnn Blbbblblblblblbl Rrrrrmmmmoonoon Blblblblblblblbl . . .

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
and Grace will lead me home . . .

Speedy's wearing a black suit lined with purple; he's up on the stage, he's snapping his fingers and he's easing his voice higher and higher, showing off his range, hitting that pitch, that high note that has the women and girls screaming, "Speedy! Speedy!" Oh, he's loving it, bringing it back down, lowering his hand so the band will know, slowing it down, and the dancers are slowing, feeling romantic, hugging and laughing and kissing and he's in heaven singing his own songs now, "If loving you was ice cream, I'd. . . ." He's thinking, "This is so nice. So nice." Marvin Gaye is in the wings. The great Marvin Gaye is in the wings back behind the curtain and Speedy is supposed to do a couple of short numbers, then step off, let the great man on, but the audience loves him; he plays with them, brings his voice way down, lets it soar high high, higher than Marvin can reach and he starts to walk off the stage, the girls are screaming, "Speedy! Speedy!" He just can't make himself go off. He strides back to the center of the stage. Marvin Gaye's handlers are in the wings waving to Speedy, waving for him to come off. Marvin is pacing—would he have to get rid of this upstart, stealing the show, not what you want with a warm-up band. Marvin is waiting to go on and waiting outside the auditorium is one of Mikey and Pop's top men, not the top man, he's up on the stage, but one of the top men who will soon be telling Speedy, "You got to come back. Mikey says he needs you. It's Saratoga. We've got some good horses but the men don't know how to handle them. Mako's got a knee. The Sport's old tendon is flaring up. Mikey says you've got to come back. We got this new colt, a rogue, who needs some training. Almost killed William in the stall the other day. . . ." But he's not telling him that yet. Speedy's on the stage and the women are oohing and aaahing as he slips into a Smokey Robinson number, and they're melting, they're running their hands up and down their sides and shimmying and swaying and swooning as he sings, "People say I'm the life of the party/ 'Cause I tell a joke or two."

He's young and fit and strong and fast. He's Speedy. He's up high on the canvas ring at the rec center at Saratoga and he's moving. He's dancing. He's bouncing off the ropes. The sweat is glistening on his black muscles. His arms are long and strong as steel and they whip out of nowhere at his Italian opponent who has his elbows held up high and is fighting peek-a-boo style and who throws a right hook. Speedy dodges the punch by simultaneously snapping his head back and backpedalling. He lures his opponent in, tempting him, convincing him to go

again for that right hook which throws the Italian off balance and that split second Speedy moves in on him jab jab jab with the left, a right to the body, jab jab jab with the left, a right to the body, jab jab jab, a right to the head, a flurry of punches, a blitzkrieg of shots to the head and he's standing over the would-be brawler.

He's in heaven now and he is victorious over his opponents of a lifetime: poverty, little education, diabetes, pain and arthritis in his right shoulder from decades of rubbing, really rubbing, horses; pain and a steel rod in his foot from a warmblood stepping on him; glaucoma, operations on both eyes, blindness; weight gain from not being active, not being Speedy; the constant, always-present tension as well as danger of dealing with prejudice and bigotry in a racist country for an entire life, being called "nigger" by his white landlord; and lastly, death—he's looking down victoriously at the one-time bragging Italian pugilist now trying to regain his breath on the floor as the referee goes through the countdown. . . .

"I holds nothin' against him," Speedy is thinking. "It says in the Bible—'do not judge so that you may not be judged.' He's a man; I'm a man. That's all there is to it."

He is victorious. And hell, he's got to get back to the barn, water off, feed. His big horse is in tomorrow. The Sport. Getting some age on him. He's got to check on him. He's going to beat his entry, the favorite, the champion—Bon Nouvel. Gots' to beat him. Will beat him. Against all odds. But he'll do it. Paddy Smithwick is going to go out there on The Sport and show that young rider Tommy Walsh a thing or two.

He looks down at the defeated fighter on the mat.

"What comes around goes around," he thinks, and then he doesn't think but rather hears, in a powerful baritone from above, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you."

He extends his glove and lifts his opponent up off the mat, onto his feet, and then he's out of the ring, back at the barn checking on The Sport who will challenge Bon Nouvel in a historic, blistering duel down the back stretch, around the turn, over the last, and win.