

TAILS FROM THE TRACK



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A Journey of Self-Discovery on the Backstretch

Janice Gannon

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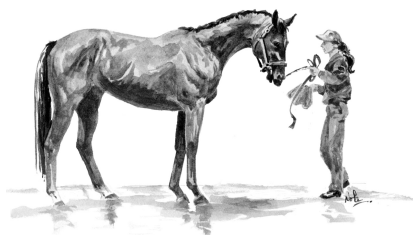
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*To “the gang” - Sandy, Sue, Henrietta and Donny.
Your friendship supported me through my rough days and gave me
the courage to reinvent myself.*



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PREFACE

This story is about my years at Woodbine (and Fort Erie and Greenwood) racetracks, from September 1977 to the late summer of 1986. During this period, Thoroughbred racing was experiencing a renaissance. Money was plentiful then and many champions emerged.

I have written this as a sort of you-are-there experience. It is a window into a time that is rapidly vanishing. Because I want you to feel what life was like on the backstretch, I have deliberately used the expressions we used, even when grammatically incorrect. Because of the amount of jargon, I have made an extensive glossary. The first time a word or expression appears which is likely unfamiliar to you, I have put any such word or expression in bold type that appears in the glossary.

This is my personal story and I make no apologies for information that is biased or wrong. Memory is not perfect. People can remember the same incident very differently, according to their point of view. This is my story and the incidents are as accurate as I recall.

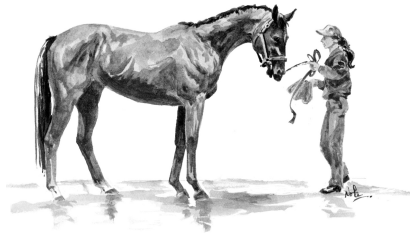
Although there have been books written about the backstretch, they were mostly by newspaper men or else written by outsiders, people temporarily employed there. I have yet to read another account by a groom or exercise rider. It was and is a totally unique environment.

This is also about my own journey, of growing up and acquiring the skills I needed to be successful in life. The lessons learned were subsequently parlayed into a rewarding career teaching riding and a happier personal life.

I have used pseudonyms for about half of the people in my story. I worked for a number of men named Robert or John. For clarity, I have used different first names. Whenever I portrayed someone in an unflattering manner, I substituted another name. Otherwise, I used the real names of some of the trainers because they are historical people. For most of the backstretch personnel I used their real first name but not much else in the way of identifying information. Some people I have used their actual names with their permission.

Except for Briar's Boy and Treya, all the horses names were either their actual names or their common barn names.

Now, come with me into the world of racehorses.



Chapter One

HORSE CRAZY

It's September and I have just been fired for the first time. Fresh out of Humber College's Horsemanship Program just four months ago, I had begun working on a well known horse breeding farm. It was a dream job except for my cantankerous elderly boss for whom I was to prove equally as stubborn. By summer's end, we came to a mutual parting of ways. Since I was now supporting myself, I needed a job, fast and preferably one with horses.

I was told the racetrack is always hiring and I decide to try the racetrack option. What I do not know is that by September, most of the trainers are downsizing their operations, as horses break down and are moved out. Along with the warmer weather, many jobs are disappearing for the season.

The backstretch is a world unto itself and the raw public is excluded. Everyone needs a badge to get past the gate security. Nonetheless, I am sitting in the crude construction trailer which serves as a personnel office. It is located just inside the chain link fence that surrounds the backstretch at Woodbine race track. The interior of the trailer is chilly and nearly bare. Against the end wall a steel desk huddles with chairs stiffly arranged on either side. Behind the desk is a calendar, under the calendar sits a filing cabinet.

Beside them, a small heater throws out a weak heat. This is the office of Jimmy, a semi-invalid whose job is to sort out the competent from the criminal and the riff raff and to match available jobs on the back stretch to the applicants. I feel like an alien in the starkly decorated office.

“Do you have any experience?” Jimmy inquires gently.

I reel off my short resume. Graduate of Humber College’s Equine Program, rubbed **yearlings** for Windfields Farms, riding and breaking yearlings, a stint on a breeding farm.

“I might have something for you. Beasley Farms needs a swing groom. It is not full time but it may be just the ticket for you.”

Jimmy leads me outside of the trailer where I climb onto the seat of his golf cart. The sun has not yet peeked over the horizon but I can just see the horses galloping on the training track, black silhouettes against a pale pink-and-baby blue sky. The entire back stretch is bubbling with activity as I am quietly whisked down to Barn 7.

* * *

I cannot remember a time when I was not passionate about horses. It was as if I popped out of the womb worshipping them. While other little girls played house, my daydreams were all about horses. It was a time when television was dominated by ‘westerns’ with my favourite cowboy being Roy Rogers. My teen age sister Dee read horse books aloud to me. My sister Anna knew the best way to get even with me was to torture my stuffed toy horse named Dark Joel.

When asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, the girls of my generation primly answered, “Teacher” or “Secretary” or “Mother.” My teachers were clearly puzzled by my reply of “Cowboy”. Okay, there was this little matter of the masculine persuasion. Clearly, God had made a mistake when handing out the gender allotment. After all, it was my hero Roy Rogers who rode the stunning palomino Trigger and caught the bad guys while his wife Dale Evans rode in after all the action was finished.

Eventually, I was persuaded that being female was something I was going to have to live with but I stayed determined to own

a horse. I made deals with God (I felt that he owed me one) and pestered my parents. I read somewhere that if I believed I would receive something badly enough, God would come through.

Gradually, I learned that my dad was only a blue collar worker trying to feed five children and besides, we lived in the city. I let go of my dream.

In my real world, I was witness to some terrible fights between my parents. My sister Anna and I were sometimes used as bargaining tools to keep my mother from walking out on us. The fights ended abruptly with The Fire.

The Fire happened on Boxing Night, when my parents had uncharacteristically gone out to a movie. My parents rented out rooms in our too big house to pay the mortgage. The tenant in the attic often babysat Anna and me. This night, however, my parents left Dee in charge. When Dee came up to bed, she discovered smoke seeping from the door to the attic. She frantically roused the rest of the household but the smoke barricaded her from the attic apartment. Anna and I were sent out onto the front porch.

Smoke silently curled down the stairs in gray plumes as I watched through the front door's glass. Dee then sent us next door to neighbours for shelter. As we picked our way through the snow, in our pajamas and bare feet, I saw the sparks cascading from the back of the house. My safe world would never be the same.

When we were summoned home next morning, Mom was crying as Dad gently broke the news. Our tenant, who was both my friend and sometime babysitter, had died in the blaze.

There were no teams of social workers parachuted in to help us cope with the trauma, despite The Fire making the front page news. When Anna and I returned to school, we were still deeply in shock. We withdrew from our boisterous classmates, nursing our pain. Our fragile world had cracked apart like an egg. Our self absorbed parents never noticed how our classmates now reacted to our changed behaviour. Suddenly, we were vulnerable targets and our classmates bullied us relentlessly.

Animals kept me sane. Our pets provided the love that was in short supply elsewhere in my life. There was always a cat and a dog

and sometimes a whole parade of other animals that lived with us, including an unbroken pony. I depended on their their unstinting devotion to me. Slowly, I healed.

Two personality traits emerged as a result of my classmates' ostracism. I had developed an inner resilience beyond my years. I was also determined to forge my own destiny and would not be dissuaded by the opinions of my peers.

I was eight when Dad surprised the family by buying a pony. While I would have to share her with Anna, this did not inhibit my joy. The arrival of the pony convinced me that my steadfast belief in getting a horse had created the real deal. Having the pony was a slice of rare magic in my young life.

The real pony was very different from the story books. Star was a youngster who had never been ridden. My parents knew next to nothing about horses and we had no one to advise us. We kept the pony at my grandmother's farm in the summer and found a cheap stable just a couple of miles from my house. After a year of gentling the pony, my parents bought a western saddle and strapped it on. Then they put each of us in the saddle for a ride. When the pony laid down with Anna on her, my parents beat the pony for her misbehaviour.

I was deeply shocked. I mulled the incident over for days. Finally, I told my parents we were going to start over and slowly introduce Star to bridle and saddle. Star never misbehaved in this way again.

We made all the ignorant mistakes of newbies. We spoiled Star until she bit us, I had my share of falls. Several years later I **founded** her, letting her drink her fill of icy water when she was hot because I was in a hurry.

I rode in a western saddle until I outgrew it, then rode bareback. By age twelve, Anna and I had begun to save for an English saddle, hoping to learn jumping. For two years, we collected pop bottles and banked any other cash that came our way. Before we had enough money for a new saddle, I was fourteen and had out-

grown the pony so we sold her. Delivering Star to her new home was one of the saddest days of my life.

My frustration with Star was never having anybody knowledgeable to teach me. The pony was smart and willing but I had little idea how to better train her. I had not learned much about riding but I had learned some about horses.

Our saddle money sat in the bank until the following summer when a new riding stable opened nearby. They ran an ad in the local paper for riding lessons. The money saved for a saddle now paid for ten lessons each for Anna and me. After the first set of lessons ran out, I knew I had to find a way to keep riding. I calculated I could afford to ride if I spent my clothing allowance on the lessons. Giving up fashionable clothes was not a hard choice for me.

My first instructor was a European ex-cavalry man with a thick accent and little talent for teaching but who managed to generate wild enthusiasm among the young riders. He was replaced a year later by a much younger man who was the complete opposite. My second instructor was a polished equitation rider who was horrified by the wild excesses of our riding group. We soon shaped up under his tutelage.

Still, a lesson once a week was a long way from a career with horses. Then one night, my Dad called me urgently to the TV. The news was profiling a course in horsemanship at Humber College. Watching the television with growing excitement, I knew this was my ticket to my career.

That summer, using my plan to attend Humber as leverage, I landed a job at Windfields Farm. This was the premier thoroughbred breeding farm in Canada located just a few miles away. By the end of summer, I could adequately muck a stall, turn out a horse safely and handle most difficult horses from the ground. I rubbed yearlings for the sales and accompanied them to the September sale held on the far side of Woodbine racetrack. We were billeted in trailers and ate in the track kitchen. Naive to the racing world, I was terrified of the scruffy racetrack people I saw there. Many of them were unshaven, missing teeth, wearing ripped and unwashed clothes. There were few girls among them. I stayed close

to my co-workers as we walked through the backstretch to the kitchen for each meal.

The trailers that we stayed in overlooked the training track at Woodbine. Every morning upon waking, I could see the silhouettes of horses galloping against a pale sky. As the horses came by, I could hear their staccato beat – thud-ud, thud-ud, thud-ud. It was as if somehow through the night, magical carousel horses had come to life. This was better than anything I could have dreamed of. The early morning gallops were in sharp contrast to the seedy backstretch area.

I had no idea that four years later, I would be back.