

CONQUISTADOR 3

Monty was an odd case. A lot of different things coming together in one character. To begin with, he was a farm kid. Good with animals, one of the players who especially liked horses. Not that he hadn't spent the better part of a day on a gurney in a hospital hallway waiting for a doctor to come in on Sunday to put him back together from a horse shying sideways and snapping his leg against the side of a trailer. But he could also hang in the big city, where a successful law practice enabled him to have his own polo ranch, in partnership with Tony Gerod, all the horses he wanted, and a winter slot at Polo Puro. And he looked the part, craggy, imposing, and he had passed his good looks onto his daughter Jessica, who was the unofficial queen of the scene, with a day gig at one of the nice galleries. She made you want to buy art.

The Monty who took the call put a large corporate client on hold to do so, looking across a wide expanse of mahogany through his 38th floor office window and out over the Vancouver harbor. He'd known this day was coming. He hadn't ridden much this winter, had only been south twice this whole season, and a class-action suit had taken all his time, and had also made him a celebrity lawyer north of the border. He always liked talking to Sally, and it was noteworthy that polo came before business. That was the proper ranking of things. Lawyering was his day job. Polo was his life.

As he hung up the phone he took just a moment before picking up the interrupted call to reflect with satisfaction on the evolving theme. He'd hired a lot of pros before, over the years as many as 20 or 30, and also helped a lot of kids too, Sasha and Bey just being the present crop. But this lending of horses to Jack meant something different, more like an investment, even a speculation. It was a chance to roll the dice, to bet on something. To add to the game. It was like that moment in backgammon when you reach for the doubling cube over an interesting position, following a hunch that something very interesting could be in the offing. Also, the simple fact that he had a very nice string of polo horses to lend to a young gun meant that he was quite rich, obviously, but it was a fact that had only begun to sink in in the last year or so.

With Monty back at his business call he realized one further thing. His legal practice as at a crossroads, and his polo was too. Just as he was becoming an established figure at the national level, so that certain something about polo that he'd long sought, the sense of being inside it, of having it be his and a benefit to him, instead of a subtle, relentless, disappointing tax, was beginning to become available to him, in fits and starts. He'd been doing it so long it was past comfortable, the little rituals and activities that had become second nature. The calls, the schedules, wrangles over fields, the seasons successfully toted up. You could issue a form of balance sheet. And yet there was something else. The real inner world of polo, was it. All the shot-making wizardly, which you could buy but scarcely imitate, or the exotica of something so plainly foreign as polo, whatever was that last bastion of polo, inviolability was beginning to crumble. Something connected with Jack and his beautiful striking, but also Bey and his rapid improvement, the general jokey tone of the chukkers on the field, had the chance of giving him something he'd long since given up on, namely being a really fine player. He'd had this experience before, with women, building up his practice, but the

clearest example was when he swept several years of prizes with his animals at stock shows, and realized, after a tremendous amount of work, that he was wired to be a successful farmer. The spring, in fact, he'd made up his mind to give up farming and become a lawyer. He dared to hope that, at least on his own terms, validated by himself, he could become a really fine player. There was simply a way that the overall level of play in some of the chukkers would seem to lift up, like a fire starting and then spreading. Of course Jack would play well. Sal had started ranting and raving again, very entertaining. But so would Bey, somewhat unexpectedly, maybe buoyed by a rivalry, Nick and Than-0, everyone seeming to play above themselves, as if it were catching. And, he'd felt it in his own play. One strange reason he was hanging back and not going down as much as last year was, yes, that he wanted the kids to enjoy themselves, but he also wanted to savor his own satisfaction with his improvement. Recently he'd hit shots, in new situations, that he'd never expected to hit, beautiful neck shots at speed, splitting the goal posts from improbable angles.

And there was Bey, and the entire Bey-Jessica-Tony saga. Bey had shown up a couple of years ago to groom for his sister at a polo match at his field. Everyone liked him immediately, his openness and general willingness to help. An infectious enthusiasm. And he and Jessica had started seeing a lot of each other immediately. Bey was a very advanced rider, a deceptively large, rugby-player type who sat his horse well and competed like the Devil. His rugby experience translated directly to polo, and in two years, he'd become a serious player. With his unofficial semi-father-in-law's help, he'd crossed the divide, actually loaded horses on a trailer, hauled to the club, unloaded and tacked, suited up and ridden out there into official games. He was a real player, an immense journey in itself, no matter how you accomplished it. It was Monty who provided the barn, perhaps most of the horses, and on the big day it was the beautiful Jessica who actually drove the truck. With Jack and Bey playing well, it had been a big day for the Monty-Jessica faction as well. The clincher was Monty's horses in outrageously

orange-pink leg wraps. "I'm not down here, even in absentia, to go unnoticed," said Mr. Canadian Backer.

It's impossible to pass on without a brief mention of the third major ingredient in the Monty-Jessica faction, namely the infamous Tommy Gerod. A modern-day Gatsby, with a mysterious line in oil and gas exploration, and with a recent big hit in Mongolia, he was partners in Monty's horse and polo ventures going way back. They'd had fields together, backed clubs, the one holding up the whole project of the other was temporarily out of funds. Then'd played, and sponsored, a lot of polo. Gerod, after his success in Central Asia, the stomping grounds of another polo legend named Genghis Khan, who really had played using a goat's head for a ball, was adding new fields across the freeway in Ferndale. He had also sat with Monty in the hospital hallway and had made the calls that got the Dr. off his sailboat and into the operating room on a late Sunday afternoon. In addition to being a more than one occasion millionaire, he was a ladies' man and a fine player. He outranked Polo Puro and had a real team at the club.

Big

money. But he was around occasionally, and he made things interesting for Bey and his suit by giving Jessica a \$120,000 German sports car. The Monty-Gerod collaboration was all to the good, and had benefited a lot of players and provided a lot of excitement over the years. But this time, Gerod, far the better player, was sort of looking from the outside, was puzzled, both by Jessica's interest in Jay, whom he would usually shut down in the ladies' man department without question, and also by this unusual scene that Monty was sponsoring, and that was somewhat different.

Sally had just gotten back from ride number 2, the dun horse, two walking laps of the track, a mild canter for the 3rd lap, just to take some of the top off him, and then over to the

arena on the far side for some figure eights, stops at the fence and roll-backs right and left, and one more slow canter around the track. He was taking the saddle off when up pulled the dreaded yellow golf cart. If there was going to be any genuine unpleasantness in what was shaping up as an O.K. day, it was going to come from this quarter. It was Guido 's wife Cally and boss. Sure, he could squirm and flirt with Marisa-Piece-A, but he was firmly in her grasp, and she called the shots. There had been a big brawl at the arena on this side earlier, just when he was taking his second horse out. Something about someone not supposed to be using this arena, which was specifically for Bashi and her clients, and "You've ruined my lesson, I hope you're happy," put out there at about full scream volume. An unsettling way to start a ride. But horses had to learn to live with people before they could teach their two-legged cousins anything.

He was an old-enough hand to know that there would be repercussions. In his family days he had developed what he called The Ripple Effect. Angie, his English wife, was definitely boss, and sometimes it was simply more than she could do to be civil. She'd pick on him, not like something he'd done, and he just about always hit Matthew with some unwished for task, then Matthew would remind him how sister Lindsey never had to do anything, so Angie would make her do something even as simple as get off the phone. Before the ripple even got down to the dogs and cats level of things, not to mention the insects and microorganisms, it would have ruined his days and given him something he simply couldn't get off of. He wasn't sure what it was, but it certainly rippled on down, and covered the whole pond with its specific woe before a sort of injured silence and healing period took over. The morning brawl, yelling and publicly-vented anger like that was always unsettling, so there had to be consequences. He was not a major pro, a big hunter-jumper renter, so it would probably be him. Besides, he was on her way home. If you didn't see her, you would go unscathed.

`Johnny,'she called out, just as he was attempting to step into his tack room, Your check was short. I told you last month you had to pay by the horse, not by the pen. I counted seven in that back pen for most of March and you write me a check for \$1,100. What is this? she was rising to the occasion, and might make a real scene. "What is it about you people?" Yes, this was going to be one. Not every time, but sometimes, she would soar past whatever barrier the social contract held up against open, intentional offense giving, and this was such a time. It usually began with "you people." she would comment on your motives, implying your turpitude and overall evil. In this case it was neither. Guido had given him the pen rate. Then when one of the gold-plated hunter-jumpers pulled out and left an entire barn unrented, they needed more money and came back to everyone. It was how they did business, abusing their power, knowing that most of their clients were captives. Where else, after all, could they go, since the valley was developing so fast every horse pasture had major dollar signs hanging over it? And if we told you one thing then and are telling you something else now, and if you don't like it, you can just get the hell out of here. The threat. They never backed down, never apologized, in short were never sensible; they simply left a lot of people feebly hoping that they'd get theirs someday and "you just can't treat people like this."

"Guido said something else. How am I supposed to know what to do when you tell me different things?"

"I'm telling you now. Look at me." More complete inappropriateness. "I'm telling you now, you owe me \$600 for March," and drove off.

"We'll just have to see," he thought. "She just has to get her rocks off, and she's doing little enough of that with Kevin. I'll tell him and he'll feel it out with her, and they'll leave me alone."

But is it ever not like this? What is this tremendous drag on everything? It's entirely difficult enough to keep a string together, keep them fed and healthy and sell enough of them to live. Why was it so impossible to get along?

He'd hosed his horse off and put it away by the time Jack came in with the chestnut. He felt like springing for lunch over at Las Casuelas, maybe just some caldo de Res, beef stew, pero bien picante, and he felt sure that if Jack came along, he'd pay for him too. More scholarship kid. Still, he was interested in diffusing this semi-hostile vibe and getting back on the good foot with his protege. The problem was, he was no longer the nice kid he had been, if he ever had been. There had been a change even in the last year. There was just an edge that hadn't been there before. He was good and he knew it, and that was O.K. Just. But it was this hardness, a thoughtlessness, that looked like it might be a big problem later on, and if he could deflect that, even a little, he intended to.

One example that kept coming back was l'affaire Carol. It involved the loan of an old station wagon and a two-horse trailer, no big deal, from Carol, who was not much of a player but was nice and friendly. She left her rig at Marisa's and occasionally stayed overnight rather than drive back tired, at night, after a weekend game. They could borrow her trailer, but she specifically wanted them to let her know. When a group of junior players from another club was staying over, they'd used the rig without asking, and had totaled it. Johnny had had to drag the rig in off the road, after unloading and walking the horses in. Later, Jack confessed that he didn't care that Carol got mad, almost like it was her punishment for not being a good player. He didn't regret not asking her first, and even didn't seem to regret the accident and the damage to her property. This all sounded 100% like mama talking, and it would be problems later on. It was a service profession, if you ever got into it, and you don't go far enjoying scoring off your clients, which Carol, in a sense, was. But they didn't even know that. If

they had, no way they'd have gotten into a careless accident. This was their weak link, carelessness, selfishness. Being bemused by what goes on on the field, not noticing all the work and impeccability that has to go on around it. Put a high value on the entire game. It's what he had learned to be good at. Frown and discourage when it's wrong, and beam and encourage when it's right. He thought he might be able to accomplish a little of that over lunch.

As they were pulling away from Barn 4, here came Jessica and Bey, unusually early for them. She had afternoons at the gallery, and he substituted and didn't usually get there until 3 or 4. Maybe they'd taken off for a morning in the sack. He could definitely see that. But Jessica could be a lot more complicated than she needed to be, standing there, smoking, looking anxious. And a good-looking woman being anxious is an invitation for everybody to join her.

Bey didn't like all the deal with the Montys, nor how they would sometimes talk to him. But when Sal would rub it in and ask, "How do you take that?" he was strong and didn't answer, "The way you take it from Cally. He was trying to learn from him, not piss him off, and most of all he wanted to learn the mysterious capacity to get a good scene together. Once, up north, he had seen Monty ride up on the porch of one of his own rental properties and yell for the renter to come out and move a garden hose that was in the way, right goddam now, and it reminded him of an old Monty Python sketch, "Come out here right now, you swine, and take your beating." It was unnerving. It was one of his defenses, being a substitute school teacher in a rich man's world. He couldn't make the slights and insults not happen, but at least he could laugh at. It was quite a scene, a well-dressed polo player on a fancy horse up on a porch, yelling, berating, proving that maybe feudalism wasn't dead.

"Let's not have a long session today. I'm a little tired," she said with a wink.

"I think it might help to ride a little slower, hit a little shorter."

She didn't necessarily like his coaching persona, after all, she'd been in the game her whole life and he a mere two years. But, he was sort of responding to her, even if it meant she'd have to curb her impulsiveness and wish to go fast, even if she didn't always connect with the ball. He'd played rugby hard, to win, and he had quickly realized that you just don't ride over the ball, even if it means slowing down. He knew how to grind it out. He'd played sports at a tough level and he just wouldn't be shoved. It was also his horse he'd tacked up, even if it was their barn, and he was better than she was, no matter how long she'd been playing. He didn't have attitude, like Jack but he did take stances and push for results. It was his right. The fact was, he loved her. Loved her willingness to get out there and risk not being great at something. mostly he loved her engagement. He didn't expect a lot to happen and figured that he was in some way expendable. For all he knew, she was also "seeing" Tommy Gerod.

Slut. Puta. But that's beautiful women. Everyone wants in their knickers.

He always liked to start out on his gray mare. His one good horse. He also had a big bay gelding that scared people with his wildness, so he would sometimes put him in chukkers. He started her off with an extended trot, but she would get bored and start pulling. Time to shift her into another gear. Jessica would want to start hitting, which meant he'd be following and picking up and sending back her misses. It was a little like being ball boy on a tennis court. Still, you did hit a lot of shots and that never hurt.

Today, he was having a bit of a brain wave. In the last chukkers, he thought he'd found something. First with Jack, then with Sal, he'd ridden up with the ball on the near side, they're just carrying it along on the offside, a slowish, green chukker, and there, with the

ball right down between the two galloping horses, he'd had the thought, "This is it." It's not the big shots, the swinging it out alone, it's the paired horses and riders, the ball down between, offense-defense, where the game really takes place. More like a rugby scrum. He'd gotten a glimpse of what it might be like if you could practice what in a game happens sporadically, and unexpectedly.

He wanted Jessica to come up alongside, off the right, and just see if they could keep it going. He'd hit forward with his forehand, and she, instead of defending and trying to back the ball or knock it out of the way, would hit it forward too. Off they went, one hit, two hits, it's tough for her to stay up with her backhand, but she did hit one, then one, two more for him before they rode past the ball and had to turn around.

"Let's try it a little slower."

"And I'll hit the forehands," she said.

O.K. Here goes. He hit one, they grazed the second, but he picked it up with another near sider(his left), and they went ahead, for five, six shots. stop, turn around, one, two, miss. It was frustrating, but it was also cool. He'd never practiced this way before. There was something about the ball, down between the horses, hit, hit, hit, that was playing with his mind. He'd never seen the ball so clearly.

He caught a glimpse of Jessica as they turned around for another try, and she had a delighted, childlike expression on her face that he'd not registered her having on a polo field Before. Usually, she was grim and determined and almost never performed up to the level you'd expect of an ordinarily athletic girl.

Way back, he'd gotten the shop manual for a little BMW sedan he had at the time. Adjusting the timing required a light, which you'd clip on the distributor and then shine down a hole on the flywheel. There was a ball imbedded on the side of the fly wheel, and the light, theoretically, would flash just as the ball passed by. Perfectly adjusted timing, and you were supposed to see the ball at the bottom of the hole. The illustration in the manual showed it clearly. As it was, he'd peered down this hole, shifting the distributor slightly left, slightly right, and never had, for absolute certain, seen the ball. But it was fascinating to try. And like this new drill on the field. A ball popping in and out of view in a way to make much easier to see. They took one more pass and hit it, between them, eleven times.

Let's not be greedy. That was pretty cool. what about one more lap and then feed and Leave? "Fine with me," she said, exhilarated. It was a strange first for both of them, There were shots in sequence that were new. Also, they'd really collaborated. That made twice today, at two different things. Jessiica was always railing about all anyone wanted from her, protesting too much, maybe, after all it was the main thing about her, that she was so beautiful. And more, she had that old stand-by, extreme fuckability. For a woman, at least, the pearl of great price. But she really did want to play well, hit well, and this moment of doing some of it was thrilling.

"That was the most fun I've ever had on a polo field."

"Same for me," he yelled out good naturedly. And it was true.

They didn't feed and leave. They got two more horses out and had a much less satisfactory session the second try. Nothing major. They were just out of sync. It didn't work the way it

had the first time. Maybe they were trying for too much. They were just coming into Barn 3 when Sal and Jack got back from lunch. Sal thought it a little unusual that they were still around, had ridden twice. Maybe they were getting the bit in their teeth. This would help with Monty, who, although he sought out his own horses and would probably never buy one from him, unavoidably looked upon him as the resident adult, the den mother, and if the kids were having a good time at the barn, that reflects well on everyone.

If they just keep doing it, they can't help but improve. He'd try to hammer that one home to Jack. It's not the technique. It's not the formal instruction. It's just the keeping on with it that produces the results. That's a lot easier said than done. To begin with, there are people involved, so there will be plenty of times when they'll do something that makes you want to kill them, or at least never see them again, and that tends to mean ducking the barn for a day or two, or even weeks or months, until it all gets patched up. And that breaks the flow. stops the improvement.

He even had an idea that people couldn't stand to get good, actually fought it off. They'd leave well enough alone, and would rock along, showing up regular and getting in that good, regular practice, and Satan himself couldn't keep them from making giant strides. And then, just when they had it going, everybody's doing well, there would be some blow up and it would all turn to shit. It was as inevitable as Cally pulling up in the yellow shit-mobile when there'd been a brawl in the arena. Bey and Jessica seemed to have something to do, as they waved on their way out in separate cars. Now's one more chance to extract a conscientious response from Jack about the tack.

With a sudden flash of insight he said nothing for once and went in and got a breastplate and some saddle soap and dropped them on the shop table. Some water in a

bucket, a clean rag, and he was hard at it. Jack who was all set to be defensive and need to go back and pretend to do some homework, was undone by this, sat watching for about 30 seconds, and then went in and got his main bridle, the one with the rawhide noseband, took the bit out of it and started taking it apart,

The same things aren't hard for everyone, he thought. What you want, respecting everyone's different strengths and abilities, is a little balance. Why should you have a star whacked out on cocaine berating a barn nigger, when you could have the good player carrying his own weight and the barn star make a play once in a while.

The tack work went on wordlessly for maybe 20-30 minutes, 30 at the most, but it seemed a lot longer, and real good. A sort of quiet buzz of activity, like a beehive at work, or so he guessed. He'd gotten out an extra hundred at the ATM, on pure impulse, and thought he'd go take a shower and stretch out and catch dinner at the casino, and maybe, just maybe, bet a few hands of blackjack on the way in to eat. This was the best and most optimistic he'd felt in a long time. Am I back? You mean my dick's actually going to get hard again. The session had come to a close on a good note, he thought, as he swung the tack room door shut and locked it. \$100 is enough. That's just fine.

CONQUISTADOR 4

They played a lot of craps in the Marines. He was what they called a wrong-way bettor, betting against the shooter making his point. Let them roll out a number, then bet seven or eleven comes first. It doesn't always work, but when it does, it was very satisfying. California casinos don't have craps, and the little one he went to didn't even have poker. Just a few tables of black jack. All the rest was just slots. Entirely passive. Just sit there and push buttons. Before going in to dinner he sat down at one of the two tables going this early, run by a tall, good-looking red-head. A real artist. she could stand up your last make or break card and make it slowly tumble over, like "Timber." she could make a \$10 bet dramatic, which was what you wanted. He didn't fool himself about the odds on this casino blackjack. In a home game, the odds are nearly even. But the casino dealer doesn't have to finish his hand if you bust. He wins even if he would have busted by playing out his hand. Two nice runs of about \$200 each left him up \$380, which he hung in there and backed down to \$280 before standing up and going in to dinner.

This was such a different life now. He'd been divorced for almost ten years. They'd had 28 years together, raised the two kids, done well, bought some property, then the split. She wanted "out." He didn't know, or want to know, why. She was sure acting like there was someone else. He was definitely not her favorite person when things came to a screeching halt. But nothing must've worked out, because she was now living alone in Washington, working in a casino. Those were tough jobs to get if you weren't an Indian, but, after all, she was still cute.

It had hurt then. But when she made noises about wanting to get back together, he wanted none of it. He'd tasted freedom, not that he did much with it. He was old-fashioned, even

proper, in a way. When he heard some cute babes talking at a polo party about having their bushes done, it embarrassed him. He was also not the woodsman he had been, and didn't like the after effects of viagra. In fact, he just didn't like having to take a pill to get a useful hard-on. What were the scientists looking for when they found this unusual effect, he wondered. Anyway, he figured to just stoic it and suffer his age with what dignity he could muster.

That didn't mean he didn't have fantasies. He was older, but he wasn't dead. Only now, instead of devoting himself to making them come true, he just laughed at them. He fantasized about Marisa-Piece-A. But that was tricky, because she was Jack's mom, and he was trying to have a good effect on her son. And, like every other man on the place, he definitely had fantasies about Jessica. She drops by the barn, no one is there, he bumps into her on the way into the tack room, and they dissolve into a sweaty coil on a stack of saddle blankets. But it was also humorous, and strangely energizing to find it so. This all added up to a bemused good feeling which put people at their ease and made women, especially, accessible and free around him.

There were also practicalities to consider. Sex is obviously a pretty forward-thrusting thing, for when you're expansive, doing well, intending to do better. If you're banking your fires, doing without, not seeing much of a way to improve, not only does it have an inhibiting effect on your pecker. It even retards your interest. When he was up and coming, he'd been interested in things, had ideas, and not just about women and money. Now, he was more likely to be calculating from his current cash balance to how far it would go before he had to replenish it. Not exactly forward-thrusting. Did he absolutely have to sell a horse this summer, or could he hold out until November when the buyers started showing up for the season? Get by. Make do. It had been unusual for him to check out an extra \$100 for blackjack. These days he usually just held tight.

He hadn't been at his table more than a few minutes, back from the buffet with some enchiladas, some salad, and a bowl of soup, when he noticed Bey and Jessica standing by the cashier stand, waiting for a table. Just as they saw him he waved them over. In earlier times, there might have been some tone of rivalry with Bey over Jessica. After all, she was turning heads as they walked over to his table. when Bey would get down and blue about Tony Gerod or

some other suitor she'd met at the gallery, he'd talk about what a slut she was, how easy.

Although she had lots of guys hitting on her, and may have had her lapses, after all being human

and there are a lot of hot guys out there, she seemed to have standards and put a high value on herself. Besides, he liked Bey. They had a completely different kind of relationship than Bey had with Monty, who bossed him and would threaten to take it all away if he didn't do this and so. And Jessica could be quite sharp and demanding. But Bey didn't work for him. He was more like a big, good-natured nephew.

"So you all took out two horses each today."

"Yeah. Must be inspiring to see such dedication," said Bey.

"Sure is. You all might even learn to play polo. You're not after my spot are you?"

Good laugh all around.

"We could never hope for that."

"Of course not." Bey liked to needle him, just a little, but also to pay court. He couldn't just be suppliant, an underling. He had a lot of pride. Rugby was about as tough as polo. He simply liked being around someone who was turning into a real mentor. Not in any formal way, although he would occasionally say things about his polo. He'd get on him about his ride-offs, simultaneously too rough and yet ineffective.

"That bump was at too much of an angle. Just ease in there. Get your leg in front, and then ride. You're too into hitting." And indeed he was. But it was only the top players who made ride-offs, even decisive, you're-out-of-the-play ride-offs, look so effortless, even invisible. But mainly it was just how he lived. He was the human being entrusted with the most freedom he'd ever seen. He was abroad in his west, alone and yet free. And here was Bey with not one, but two, boots on his neck, Monty's and Jessica's. Sal didn't have anyone standing on his. Sure, Guido and Cally. could drive by and deliver the occasional whack, but nobody was on him, trying to keep him in line, to make him do stuff. He truly lived at God's good pleasure.

"Did you call Daddy," asks Jessica.

"Got him at the office. He says it's O.K. He respects that it's an odd solution. I'm not really firing Jack, just trying to make him grow up, get a little realism in his thinking. Your Dad gets that. He's not hiring him. He's just lending him some horses so he can keep riding. And I wouldn't be surprised, shifting his gaze to the Bey, that he's not also just trying to keep you with a good practice partner.

"Mont would never do that." "Oh, he just might. One, he's proud of your polo," although he'd never admit it. And, now he's three-fourths of the way to a pretty decent team."

"Daddy would never feel bound or obligated," chimes in Jess.

"Probably right. But, let's face it. Everyone likes to be part of some success, and poor old downtrodden Polo Puro may just be coming into some. Last year, the year before that, there were far better players around, but it didn't have that feeling of satisfaction and contentment, like people were actually enjoying themselves.

Jess nodded. Her Dad was feeling good about things, glad to be able to give. And, without quite being in on the sports mystery like the guys were, or claimed to be, she could definitely notice that they were all inwardly happy about something. And that was another kind of sexy, not the two blokes squaring off for the gal variety, but the sexy of a current touching everyone.

She had never thought highly of Sal, indeed of any of her Dad's polo hires. Some had been imposing and good looking and knew their way around, but none had struck her as especially talented or capable, apart from their unfathomable skills on the polo field, which were a world unto themselves. And she would have never thought Sal capable of something as elusive and mysterious as this collaborative vibe that was going on now. She'd been around the game a long time seen a lot of bravado and hollow confidence, heard a lifetime's worth of fishing for compliments, and seen many, many puzzling brawls that seemed to grow out of the dissatisfaction of trying to do anything as difficult to play as polo. But she'd never seen anything quite like this, going into its second year.

As if reading her mind, Sal said something most unexpected.

"So, when is it all going to blow up?"

"Huh," they both muttered, simultaneously.

"I said, when is it all going to blow up. The scene, the good vibe? Like the proctor coming in on a beer party during finals week?"

"You mean, you don't expect the scene to survive."

"I didn't say that. But it will have opposition. If Mont weren't such a good guy, and genuinely interested in your progress, I'd have picked him to be the spoiler. I've also never

seen a good scene make it past the first flush of success. It just puts people under too much pressure. Success changes the stakes, and requires people to be different. Like our good friend here. He's used to wanting to. But there ain't no wanting to. You either do or you don't. I could point out to you that you've never once seriously considered the very live possibility that you're going to be a good player, if you can keep it on the tracks, Am I right?"

Dufus smiles broadly. Sal liked this kid, liked that he could talk to him. Jack didn't enter into such conversations, and it was his loss. In a way, he didn't need them. He was that good. But it wasn't what went on on the field that was the hard part. It was the getting on it, and staying on it, that seemed to defeat just about everybody. Even the old money patrons could be noticed to have trouble with success. Maybe their program was on the upswing, showing real signs, and yet they didn't win the big one, or the one that was especially wanted, and here came the tampering and meddling and next thing you know, the program doesn't give off that happening feeling anymore. It's just a program, as in dead-as-a-stone program.

You're on your way. Sure, it's 100 years away, but something. And it's that something's happening which simultaneously satisfies people and also gets 'em to dreaming up ways to fuck it up. when Mont showed up last year, pretty determined to let us all know how much he knew and what lofty reaches of the sport he'd inhabited, I just thought, "Here goes." But he didn't. somehow he controlled himself. It's not that he liked what he saw. It was just something he'd never seen before. And he had the good sense to reserve judgment. He's seen a gillion chukkers with some full pros directing traffic and everyone else trying to keep up. what he hadn't seen before is a bunch of hackers on a swell of confidence, not needing any full pros.

"This thing with the horses and Jack will be alright. we're not building in stone, here. We're just keeping it on track until the end of the season. Then we'll all get kicked

out or figure out some other subterfuge and gain release from the pressure of actually participating in a real thing."

Jessica looked at him as he finished. He'd been speaking only a minute, maybe less. But he'd put his finger on something she'd wondered about but been unable to express. It was possible to assemble a collaboration that would resist tampering. But you had to know you were doing it. It couldn't be an accident. She'd now seen it. Like the knights of the Round Table or something. If it could start by accident, it couldn't be kept going that way.

She'd always noticed that he'd never done any formal coaching, and virtually no one thought of him as a teacher. Yet here was evidence that a lot of thought had gone into all the improvement everyone was making. Even today, coming up with a completely new practice drill, even that seemed to be just one more feature of the Polo Puro scene. She liked him better now, and even admired the way he worked. He wasn't going for the gravy, or even the credit. This took a lot of patience. He just wanted it to work.

The conversation wound down and they walked out together, past the blackjack tables, down aisles of slot machines, out into the warm night air. Nothing was in the bag. Nothing had been accomplished. But some guidelines had been set out. There was some expectation, some hope, and some apprehension. If something could be put together, it could certainly be taken apart. It's the builders who have to be on the look-out, and Johnny was. He'd seen too many scenes submit to wanton destruction and cease to exist.

"These kids," he thought, as he got into his Cherokee. They don't see the subtlety with the glow as warm as the evening, they pulled out of the parking lot, Johnny turning left, for the Mafia condos, Jay and Erica turning right for their loft. They had it covered.

Knights of this funky chivalric order were riding out, covering the map with a subtle emanation. Just standing in the check-out at the grocery, filling the tank, waiting for stamps, if you knew you were standing for something, trying to do something, maybe that got communicated to people around you. That much doubt and dismay turned aside. Reassurance, after all, has to be built on something solid.

When Jay and Erica got home, they wordlessly went to bed and got right to it. Not the usual intensity, perhaps, but steady and full. They were savoring it, both, in a way, loving the old man as they worked away. Loving their feeling. They'd joked at the barn that young men are nature's Viagra, but simply feeling good was awfully sexy in itself. This wasn't the first time either had felt it was really going on. Bey had had one big breakthrough at basketball in Jr. High, years before Rugby, that he'd lived on for years. And Jessica had starred is a rider, learned French, and most of all, come of age as a hot young babe, then matured into A stunning woman. But they'd never known they were doing it when they were doing it. This seemed to be Sally's unique contribution. He'd been through it all, too, both as a player, peaking, plateauing, peaking again. All that was inevitable if you worked at something, if you wanted it enough. It was that extra layer, cooked slowly over many hours, directors chair in the barn aisle, hot coffee, just ruminating and reflecting, going over similar cases, that the whole theory had finally jelled.

He didn't even lay the cold hand on himself, which he usually did, just the bachelor's sleeping pill. This evening he didn't need the help of any old flame to go to sleep, nor a rehash of the first time he (nearly) scored. Drive the old Jeepster slowly down the farm road, back up into a stand of corn, turn up the radio, some slow dancing, back into the front seat. She stretches out, head in your lap, a smorgasboard of teen ripeness. Light caresses, roaming hands. The old tape, that had never somehow gotten demagnetized from overuse. He felt good.

He'd warned them. This wasn't going to be free. It was still highly likely to get fucked up and destroyed, and if it didn't, it wouldn't be because of the blinding, overpowering influence of some unstoppable agent for good. High-profile, name coaches could seem to have that capacity. But if you looked closely enough, or kept the file open long enough, it was either an accident never to be repeated, or the undeflected path to glory had never happened at all. It was something else, competitive success from a huge advantage, or just the display of something that was superior and had never been challenged. if this scene was gotten to work, it would be because everyone had been at least temporarily awake enough to keep pulling on the right end of the rope until something permanent could be accomplished ...a nice, warm evening, crickets and frogs, maybe an irrigation pump in the distance. High summer.

