

HEY, DOG -- RUN (NO SWEAT!)

DOUG NUFER

Seattle, Washington

The following excerpt from Doug Nufer's unpublished novel is set at Riparian Park, a dog-racing track in Billyville, Arkansas. Ken Honochick, the narrator, is motoring across America with his former landlady, Miriam, on the proceeds from the sale of her apartment building. Miriam has just purchased three greyhounds from C.Braxton Glade (who will continue to board and race them) named If You See Kay, Althea's Red Zip and Do Do Daddy. Althea's, a sure-fire loser, is in the first race of the day. See if you can identify the literary constraint under which this novel has been written.

The morning brought a problem that wouldn't go away. Although it sounded like an old putdown, we went to every thrift store in Billyville, Arkansas, looking for the right mixture of chintzy and snappy, so we could show off without thumbing our noses. When we got dressed, nobody was going to tell us "I wouldn't wear that to a dog fight" because we were off to the races.

If You See Kay's style was speed on the lead, so Miriam wore skin-tight red, but because this was the feature, her red was a classy burgundy and because it was a race, she wore not a dress but a jump suit. There wasn't time to have her hair done; washing made a frizz that could pass for a permanent. And, you couldn't go wrong with rhinestones.

I wore a string tie--not with a silvery dog clip but a fake emerald. My jacket was black and my shirt was pink, each cut a bit too frilly for a new guy to sport in a strange town, yet the lady at Goodwill swore it wouldn't look out of place at the track.

"Only a real man can wear pink," said Miriam, and I couldn't help wondering who wore these clothes before us. Dog owners gone broke could make togs like these no more personalized than prom rentals.

Most punters didn't care what you wore. Even in the turf club where they had a men's jacket rule, they weren't too proud to hand out the stained seersuckers to guys arriving in T-shirts.

Something else set the turf club apart from the main grandstand, and it wasn't that we were upstairs. Down in the pit, all was bare--linoleum floors, painted walls, uncushioned benches--hosed out as easily as wiping clean an ashtray. In the turf club, no surface wasn't padded, with blue carpet running up the walls and around the ceiling. Smells never left the turf club--they just got shifted. Cigars, perfume, sweat and money; cigarettes, fried shrimp, grilled steak and booze blended, separated, and blended again, no matter how much ozone they destroyed with cans of Mountain Mist, Sea Spray and Pine Barren.

Vent fans sucked what they could and left behind a drone that, like the air, never cleared. A race would be finishing, a thousand people groaning below, and up in the turf club it was as if you weren't there.

Upstairs and down, the walls had pictures of winning dogs in the cluster of shots from the race and afterward--no different from winning horse photos. The photos were no more interesting than wallpaper, but then we saw Leadout to Victory.

Leadout to Victory was a photo display you couldn't ignore, on a wall you faced as you stood to bet. It honored the leadouts--old teenagers or young adults who walked the dogs in the post parade--by showing them before and after they worked at the track, and to look at Leadout to Victory was to see nobody who hadn't made it big. They weren't just druggists and insurance salesmen, beauticians and sheriffs. One owned a chain of drug stores, another ran an insurance company, three were fashion models, and no politician on the wall was anything lower than a U.S. Representative. You would have thought the road to success led not through Lawrenceville and Princeton, but Riparian Park and Catfish Community College.

We didn't see anyone from the wall in the turf club. The Friday before Thanksgiving the track was packed, as if the Turkey Trifecta had pulled 'em out of nowhere. Even upstairs, the owners, trainers, and high rollers talked about nothing as much as picking the bottom three dogs in order of finish in the first and last races. It was free to enter this turkey shoot and winners weren't restricted by drawing--only by winning entry (you weren't allowed to win more than one turkey).

"You're not going to try! We have no place to put it," I said to Miriam, but she wanted to get into the spirit, since our dog had to finish in the bottom three of Race 1.

Miriam entered twelve different combos before she realized it was almost too late to make a real bet; she wasn't alone. Bettors rushed from the entry boxes surrounding the big plastic case holding dozens of frozen turkeys to get in line at the windows, so the track had to move back post time another five minutes or not enough money would be bet to cover all the daily doubles. Some unlikely doubles were paying infinity-to-one.

"Chick!" she screamed, "cover the orphan doubles--you never know."

I did, because you couldn't afford to miss easy money, even if it meant taking impossible chances. Nobody was into contrary betting like we were. It wasn't hard to see which combos had been left untouched, only hard to bring myself to bet on Althea's Red Zip.

"If she doesn't win, I hope she loses," I flashed my tickets to C.B. and Miriam.

C.B. smirked and said he only had her in the Turkey Trot, so Miriam didn't show him her serious bet: \$100 to show on Althea's Red Zip.

"It's not too late to cancel," I said.

"Cancel schmancel, that bitch is running for her supper," she shrieked, "she don't show, she don't eat."

Heads turned, glasses raised, and nobody howled--they gobbled.

"My kind of people," said Miriam, while an unscratched recording of the whistle-march from *Bridge Over the River Kwai* came and went with the dogs.

I was too busy watching the leadouts to notice Althea's Red Zip, trying to pick the models from the vice-presidents among the five boys and three girls when suddenly I saw our mistake.

"You didn't notice?" I whispered to Miriam, who refused to talk below a shout.

"Notice what--that we can't lose?"

"What the leadouts are wearing," I said; it wasn't something she should have wanted to accept.

Some tracks decked their leadouts out like third world admirals, while others had them wear no more than matching coveralls. No wonder Miriam's burgundy jumpsuit went so well with my pink shirt.

The dogs were in the gate, which wasn't a gate but a row of cages with metal floors wired to shock the dogs into action. The lights reversed, set the track aglow against the darkened stands and with a bell, the gate popped open and the tote machines shut off, the only difference from the ponies being that there was almost no noise. The course was so small and the race so fast that the announcer gave no call beyond "They're off!" Until the mumble grew into a moan from below, all you heard was the whir of an unreal giant bone zipping ahead of the field--and barking.

Like most of the races, this one began on the stretch turn, which pushed dogs like our #7 wide out of the gate, but Miriam didn't fret when they went by the first time. The co-favorite led, as Althea's Red Zip avoided the scramble in mid-pack and had no trouble moving up on the straightaway. The leader had the clubhouse turn to himself and cruised down the backstretch, with the field strung out so you could tell them apart by color, if not number. By the final turn, he had company, forcing a picture to call the winner, while the only thing unexpected was how easily Althea's Red Zip took third.

Even if she hadn't cannonballed into the show pool, Miriam's 20-1 shot wasn't going to pay much, with a 5-2 dog and a 4-1 dog finishing one, two. The big groan came from the fact that the other 5-2 favorite finished dead last (so maybe Althea's upset showing wasn't the only unexpected thing after all), which torpedoed a load of Turkey Trifectas. None of the smart money folks upstairs won a turkey and from below there came only a gobble or two.

"The bitch did it," Miriam waved her ticket like it wasn't the stupidest bet in the world.

"Don't get your hopes up," I said, "we spent fifty bucks adopting those orphans."

Then, like magic, we were even, with Althea's Red Zip paying \$3.00 to show, recovering the \$50, not to mention a piece of the purse.

"No guts, no glory," said Miriam, "I had her all the way."

It didn't matter what we wore. For the next fifteen minutes nobody could say we didn't know our dogs.