

THE FAIR GROUNDS ADVENTURE OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD

Lee Harvey Oswald had no interest in horse racing. His presence on the backside of the New Orleans Fair Grounds was an act of fealty to Dutz Murret. The uncle's bookmaking business required frequent transfers of cash with his on-track colleague, a trainer of low-end claimers. The prosperity of their enterprise, operating in direct competition with the track's pari-mutuel system, was owed to the extension of credit and a diverse menu of sports book betting opportunities. Lee was included in an assortment of hustlers, gamblers, and quack vets that passed through the barn area gate, marked "licensed personnel only", without credentials.

The uniformed guard, whose complexion suggested quadron, acted as more scarecrow than sentry to the unwise sightseers who might chance a peak at the goings on beyond the fence. Faces familiar to the guard, such as Lee's, went unchallenged with no more than an impassive gaze from the drowsy watchman slouched on a ragged barstool in the cramped quarters of his station.

Lee was doing double duty that morning since Uncle Dutz was on his annual spiritual retreat to Manresa with his Knights of Columbus brothers. Dutz saw no conflict between the rote practice of his Catholic faith and a profession that was explicitly barred by statute.

"Illegal and immoral are two different things," was Dutz's favorite philosophic reprise.

Dutz entrusted Lee with settling the week's final tally with Phil the trainer. Most weeks had Lee making a collection from Phil for the wagers of his hapless track clientele. But for the second week running, Lee was delivering cash to Phil.

Dawn's arrival had done little to neutralize the familiar blast of cold air that enveloped the track most winter mornings. Hatless and shielded only by a well-worn windbreaker, Lee was anxious to complete his business as he approached Phil's barn with the envelope.

"When Dutz gets back, tell him Skippy hit us again. He is one lucky mother. Beats me two straight weeks." was Phil's greeting to Lee.

With no apparent interest in Phil's comment and with no change of expression, Lee handed the envelope to Phil.

"Count it, should be twenty-six hundred."

The two entered Phil's sparse tack room and huddled near a space heater where the trainer thumbed through the stack of bills at croupier speed.

"Yeah twenty six. Tell Dutz I ain't a hundred per cent there ain't' some humbug goin' on."

That Skippy, he bets some chinks, win some lose some, and then comes in with this monster biff back to back. Both winners come from those boys that ship in every winter from Chicago. Hardly ever win nothin' here."

Lee's puffed cheeks and puckered lips emphasized his disinterest in the matter.

"Phil. I am a messenger. I don't give a shit about racing, just trying to help my uncle. I bring the money, I take the money. You tell him."

Phil took no offense and lit a Chesterfield as Lee turned away. Exhaling smoke through both nostrils, Phil answered while staring at the racing calendar on his tack room wall.

"Well messenger boy, take this to Dutz. Somebody is fucking with us. Dumbasses like Skippy don't get smart overnight. I know humbug and this is humbug. Y'unnerstand?"

Lee's palpable boredom did not prevent a respectful nod as he reentered the gray chill that had just been joined by an equally annoying drizzle.

Furtive passing of cash was commonplace on the track's backside so Lee took little notice of a transfer taking place at the edge of a barn next to the guard's station. That is until Lee saw that the squat figure counting out bills to an apparent jockey bore the unmistakable warty face of Skippy Mancuso.

Lee's professed disinterest in the racing game was in part to dissemble suspicion during his Fair Grounds appearances wherein he was his Uncle Dutz's eyes, ears, and nose. Lee could not identify the rider but he snapped a mental photo for the files and proceeded past the now sleeping guard. Leaving the track confines he took a right onto the fractured sidewalk of Belfort Street.

As Lee reached for the keys to his uncle's Ford Falcon, a leather gloved hand covered his mouth from behind in a way that suggested mild restraint rather than physical danger.

"Senor Osewall. Listen careful. You go to this address to get important info from this person. You have our trust."

Lee felt a hand shove what felt like a business card into the left pocket of his jacket. Before Lee could gather himself, his surprise confronter had vaulted into a passing vehicle that was equally mysterious to Lee's suddenly confused state.

With minimal curiosity he drew the card from his pocket and turned the ignition of the Falcon. Lee was unfamiliar with the name, Guy Banister, but the address, 531 Lafayette Street, on the card was in a neighborhood he knew well. Lee was employed as a second oiler at the Reily Coffee Company only a short walk from the Banister office. The Katzenjammer Bar, located next door to the building that housed the Banister office, was an after-work stopover for a number of Reily employees including Lee.

Banister, a former N.O.P.D. officer and F.B.I. agent, was now a private investigator as well as a sworn member of the John Birch Society and the Real Minutemen. His existence thrived on anti-communist intrigue and white supremacy opportunism. His current obsession involved plotting a counter revolution in Cuba and the assassination of Fidel Castro.

In that pursuit his direction came in coded messages from Langley, Virginia. His compensation was from the same source but was received in cash payments from members of Alpha 66, the anti-Castro paramilitary. His investigatory effort involved identifying allegedly pro-Castro elements on the New Orleans waterfront and their illegal arms shipments to Havana. Oswald's name had been provided to Banister as a local asset available to assist him.

When Lee arrived unannounced in Banister's office, he was greeted with hospitable expectation by the receptionist and his presence announced over the intercom to his suitor. Feeling no intimidation at the sight of the burly Banister and his outsized biceps revealed by his short sleeve dress shirt, Lee greeted him abruptly:

"Look, that Cuban guy scared the shit out of me. All he had to do was give me the card and I would have come. I don't make much over at Reily and my uncle doesn't pay much either. Whatever you got I am interested."

Banister met Lee's report with resignation and amusement.

"That Sergio has seen too many spy movies. I told him to just give you my address and ask you to come by. But he needs drama in everything. Sorry."

Banister's plan called for Oswald to pose as a Castro supporter trying to build support for the Cuban leader.

"We'll set you up as the local rep for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. We have space next door at 544 Camp where you can have your office. We'll print up some bullshit propaganda for you to hand out in front of the Trade Mart. Probably send Sergio over there to confront you. The idea is to ID anyone that acts like they agree with you."

Lee took little convincing:

"Those guys I did the Civil Defense stuff with across the lake, David Ferrie and them, told me you were okay. So count me in."

"Dave is with us too, Lee. A true patriot. When we send you to the Trade Mart, your partner will be a Cuban defector named Luis. The Castroites call such people Gusanos...worms. He will collect contact information from the real worms, the Commies."

Moments later, the receptionist announced the arrival of Luis Sanchez whereupon Banister asked her to escort him into his office for introduction to Lee.

The face of his new colleague was at once familiar to Lee. Luis Sanchez was unmistakably the unknown figure that Lee had observed receiving Skippy's cash at the track.

Lee gave no indication he had ever seen Sanchez before. But while his eyes were locked on Banister, Oswald wondered whether this meeting was a bizarre coincidence or a piece in the Skippy Mancuso puzzle.

After finalizing the pamphlet distribution details with Banister and Sanchez, Lee walked onto Camp Street and to the phone booth in the Katzenjammer Bar. He dropped a nickel into the pay phone, dialed his uncle, and reported on his meeting with Guy Banister.

"Dutz there is a 100% shot that this Sanchez guy is the one Skippy was doling the cash to at the track. But I never let on I knew anything."

"Good work nephew. Keep playing dumb and see what else you can find out. I don't want to know about your government work but that Banister is a fucking nut. This Cuba setup he's got you doing don't sound right to me. Don't let him play you for a patsy. One thing you can't do is let them make you a patsy."

The following day Oswald and Sanchez reported to Banister and received their instructions and printed material bearing the Fair Play for Cuba markings. After they positioned themselves in front of the International Trade Mart building and began the handout, their actions drew a small crowd of curious observers.

Luis documented contact information from a few apparent sympathizers after which the pair began the walk back to Guy Banister's office. Lee had tired of playing dumb and decided to assert himself.

His five feet and nine inches cleared the top of Luis' head by half a foot giving Lee the command of physical presence. That height advantage served Lee well when he slammed Luis against an alley wall on their way back.

"I saw you take the dough from Skippy and I know it was a payoff for stopping that favorite you ran fourth with. Skippy's handing out my uncle's money and he ain't happy, jock."

The startled Sanchez shrugged and offered a rote response.

"I do what boss says senior. Your uncle, I don't know him. When they tell me my horse no win, I no win."

Having made his point, Lee saw no reason to press the issue further after warning Sanchez against a repeat performance.

On the other side of Canal Street, Dutz Murret sat at a rear table in Felix's Oyster Bar in the company of Dean Andrews, his friend and legal advisor. The portly diabetic Andrews was clothed in his customary mufti of a baggy blue business suit, unbuttoned collar, and a necktie that failed to negotiate the distance to his waistline. He imparted his wisdom to his client in the hip language of the New Orleans streets. Murret was relating his suspicion about Skippy Mancuso's sudden skill at picking winners.

"Dean, I don't like getting screwed."

"You right, Dutz. And I been hearin' about them boat races out there in Gentilly. That jock's room is the HQ for your problem with Skippy. Them pinheads are pullin' horses left and right, believe me. A Racing Form ain't worth the paper it's printed on at that joint. Might as well have a Ouija Board. But we gonna put them boys in the trick bag ourselves. They got that Cuban bug boy, Luis Sanchez, on a lot of short price horses cause of the five pound apprentice break in the weights. He rides first call for that Chicago outfit. They get him to stop one every now and then, the Red Sea parts, and one of Skippy's price horses waltzes in."

Andrews' legal representations of racetrack characters had made him wise to the ways of horse racing in New Orleans.

"Lee's been working with that Sanchez boy I think on some kind of Castro shit for that crazy bastard Guy Banister. I never asked him for details but I know he was doing stuff for the government when he was in Russia. He's not a bad kid, Dean, but he's from a fucked up family and he's married to that crazy Russian. That's why the wife and me been trying to help out. "

"Dutz, I can tell you about that wife. He came to me about her trouble with the I.N.S. They were getting ready to deport her. Only billed them a quarter for my work and still haven't been paid."

Dean Andrews regarded his receivable of twenty five dollars from Oswald as a mild annoyance. His effort on behalf of Marina Oswald's immigration status had been time consuming and in his words "I cut dat boy a lotta slack on my bill."

He spoke to Dutz about the bookmaker's surrogate son through a Lucky Strike haze of Andrews' own making. After waving off Dutz's offer to settle Lee's debt, Andrews continued staring through his always present dark glasses:

"I ain't gottta tell you about stinkin' deadbeats. You got plenty in your biz too, my boy."

Dutz nodded.

"But for me it's just part of my expenses. Like telephones, tissue paper, and my N.O.P.D. protection. Lee won't stiff you, I promise."

Andrews then laid out a plan to even the score and then some with Dutz's nemesis, Skippy Mancuso.

"Dutz I got connections in the jock's room. I defend a lot of them when they get in trouble. Next time there's shit goin' down, we will know. I got some history on those boys that come here from Chicago. The trainer, Angie Palmisano, was a small time arsonist up there. Built empty lots. He was connected to one of them gangs that Capone rubbed out. He got into the racing game in Cicero at Hawthorne. Your boy in Dallas, Jack Ruby, knew him up there. Don't know how him and Skippy got hooked up but they are birds of a feather, trust me."

Fixing a horse race requires an artistic element. It begins with the stiffing of the favorite whose rider must give no indication that he is guilty of the stewards' judgement of "failure to persevere." The more difficult aspect is the production of the desired winner.

Experienced fixers know better than to be tempted to put across an ultra-long shot which will attract more scrutiny than a horse at single digit odds. But even with masterful choreography and collusion, their unaware equine allies can fail to execute the plan mapped by the plotters.

The wait for opportunity was a brief one as Dean Andrews' intelligence network soon yielded news of an upcoming fix. With no surprise to Andrews and Murret, the pair was informed that Skippy Mancuso was at the center of the plot.

The call came late on a Thursday afternoon from the jockey room. The tenth and last race on the coming Saturday was being targeted by Mancuso and Company for another payday.

The \$10,000 claimer carded at a mile and a sixteenth drew a field of nine. The morning line favorite at 5/2 was Windy City, number three, trained by Skippy's collaborator and Dutz's nemesis, Angie Palmisano. The horse's connections had assigned their horse a losing role in the plot. The anointed one would be number four in the program, Short Squeeze, at 8/1.

Luis Sanchez was named to ride Windy City. Short Squeeze would be partnered by Dalton Boudreaux, the ring leader of the jockey room. Boudreaux's roots traced to southwest Louisiana quarter horse racing where results were often compromised by jockey conspiracies.

Short Squeeze was a speedy sort but had given way late in his recent starts when challenged on the lead. Boudreaux's plan was to insure that Windy City, the only other horse with early speed, would break a step slow and be kept occupied until Short Squeeze safely cleared the field.

To fulfill the script, Sanchez would have to take a brief hold on Windy City at the break allowing Short Squeeze an uncontested lead. After that Sanchez would move to the rail allowing other horses to keep him pocketed in what riders call a blind switch.

Meanwhile Boudreaux and Short Squeeze could build a lead on the field that would leave Windy City with too much to do. At this lower claiming level, potential closers could be expected to lose heart at the sight of a leader so well to the fore.

Now aware of the details of the fix, the lawyer and the bookmaker had no intention of allowing Short Squeeze to enter the winners' circle at the race's conclusion. They were confident that with a straight ride, Windy City would be an easy winner. To counter what the pair knew would not be a straight ride, the services of a backside denizen known as Mr. Wizard would be retained. Dean explained to Dutz:

"My boy, Wizzie, is going to pay Windy City a visit and give him a little help. You know, a little energy boost. And he's gonna visit Mr. Squeeze as well to make sure he is, shall we say, relaxed on Saturday. And Wizzie has the test barn covered to make sure we got some clean pee samples for after the race. Just like Ivory Soap, ninety nine and forty four hundreds per cent pure. "

The morning of the race, Dutz Murret's phones were buzzing with Fair Grounds action but until noon there were no bets placed on the last race.

Then Dutz received a call from Phil the trainer.

"Skippy just left. Wants five dimes to win on the four in the nightcap. Lemme see, name is Short Squeeze, Boudreaux's up. What do I tell him?"

"Tell him bet. Phillip, this bull shit is about to end."

Post time for the last race was 5:10 p.m. and by the middle of the day's race card, Dutz had not taken a bet on the last race apart from Skippy's. Not unusual, he thought, as most bettors do not look beyond the next race due to capital constraints.

With the conclusion of the ninth race, Dutz was receiving only scattered small wagers on the tenth until he received a call from a bookmaker in Dallas who was part of his network.

"Dutz, I usually hold all my action down there but I just got bumped hard on the four horse in the last race. I am sitting with three dimes to win on that Squeeze horse. And I just got a call from your boy Ruby. He says some guy in his joint asked him if he could get down on the horse. Says he is a sure thing. Can you take some of this off of me, say half?"

"Just give me a number, Joe. You're good."

"Two dimes?"

"You are down, Joey."

Dutz left his makeshift office in a Victorian double across the street from the track and headed to the grandstand. In spite of his exposure to a Short Squeeze win, he laid five hundred dollar bills at the fifty dollar betting window and placed it all on Windy City to win. He then found Andrews and Oswald at the upstairs oyster bar. The three proceeded to a balcony with a good viewing angle to the finish line and awaited the start in complete silence. Being a two turn event, the race would begin and end directly in front of them.

That time of year, the last race was run at dusk. The looming darkness mixed with the glare of the sun receding from the horizon made the detection of foul play more of a challenge for the stewards.

Windy City's program odds of 5/2 had floated to 4/1 while Short Squeeze's price had dropped from 8/1 to 6/1. At the drop of the flag and spring of the gates, Luis Sanchez steadied Windy City while Dalton Boudreaux and Short Squeeze moved smartly to an uncontested lead. As planned, Windy City, running along the fence, soon drew impeding foes in front and on his outside flank. With the fixers plan securely intact, the group remained in that formation as the horses negotiated their paths along the back stretch.

Entering the far turn, Sanchez was experiencing increased difficulty holding Windy city back as Short Squeeze was getting lazy on the lead. Mr. Wizard's impact was being felt. Dutz, Dean, and Lee appeared to salute as they raised their right hands simultaneously to shield their eyes from the sunset.

The field fanned out coming into the stretch with Short Squeeze holding a three length advantage on the field but already feeling the sting of Boudreaux's whip. Windy City now had a clear path after Sanchez took him five lanes wide on the turn.

Sanchez fanned his whip across his mount's buttocks without contact hoping to avert scrutiny by the stewards while an increasingly desperate Boudreaux struck Short Squeeze with severe urgency while screaming a litany of epithets in French. Inside of a hundred yards to the finish the margin had shrunk to a length. Meanwhile two late movers threatened both of the leaders.

The finger snapping of Dean's left hand and the slapping of Dutz's program against his left thigh were the only sounds being made by the trio observing from the grandstand. They dropped their saluting right hands in unison as the horses entered the shadow covering the final desperate yards before the wire.

As the four horses crossed the finish line, they appeared as one through the sunglassed eyes of a pallid face positioned on the stands side of the track apron. A porkpie hat covered a head that appeared small when compared to the inflated torso upon which it rested. Skippy Mancuso was unable to unscramble the order in which the four horse cluster had finished.

Dutz, Dean, and Lee watching from the grandstand appeared equally unsure until Andrews spoke out in a low voice.

“Go to the window Dutz. The three win it.”

But no one moved until the tote board confirmed the assertion. When the three was posted first a collection of cheers and gasps permeated the stands. The victorious trio gave no indication of their good fortune apart from a seductive grin on the round face of Dean Andrews who handed over a fifty dollar win ticket for Dutz to cash.

Trackside, Skippy Mancuso stood motionless. With no sign of trainer Palmisano, a single groom led Windy City into the winners' circle where the track photographer captured a pale Luis Sanchez staring expressionless at the lens.

Dutz returned from the cashier's window with hundred dollar bills filling both pants pockets. When the group departed for the parking lot, there was no outward sign of its good fortune apart from the boastful stride of Dean Andrews. They climbed into Dean's worn, black Cadillac with Lee alone in the back seat.

Lee was dropped off in front of the Katzenjammer Bar. He walked around the corner to Guy Banister's office where he was informed of an important new assignment that would reunite Lee with his wife Marina.

“Lee, you can use the phone here. You are to call George DeMorenshildt, one of the leaders of our movement in Dallas. Here is the number.”

On the first ring, a voice answered:
“DeMorenshildt.”

“Mister George, this is Lee Oswald. Guy Banister told me to call you about a job in Dallas.”

“Of course, Lee. I have been expecting your call. Marina is doing well here as you would expect in our ex-pat community of Anti-Bolsheviks. There is a position waiting for you here that will leave adequate time for your more important work. Be prepared for the possibility of travel to Mexico City which I can explain after you arrive. We have engaged Mr. Ferrie to fly you here. He will provide details of your travel to Mr. Banister's office.”

Lee exited content that he had helped to right the wrong against his uncle and full of anticipation for his next patriotic assignment. He completed the short walk to Reily Coffee and collected his final pay envelope. He stuffed all but \$25 into his pocket, and scribbled “Mr. Dean” on the Reily envelope.

Now headed to his Uncle's home to pack his few possessions for his move to Texas, Lee waited for the next street car on Canal Street. When it arrived, he boarded and dropped his fare into the coin counter. He then passed rows of empty seats, ignored the “Colored Only” sign to reach the bench seat in the back. The rocking motion of the trolley soon sent Lee into a state of semi-consciousness. His uncle's words of warning echoed repeatedly through his mind.

“One thing you can’t do is let them make you a patsy.”

While the foregoing is a work of fiction, Lee Harvey Oswald, Dutz Murret, Dean Andrews, David Ferrie, Jack Ruby, Guy Banister, and George DeMorenschildt were all real life characters. All other persons in the story are a product of my imagination.

-JTR

04/22/15