

Hoppy's Pick Six

Nothing distinguished Finbar Cassidy from Bourgeois LeCompte more than the way they pronounced their place of birth. For Finbar, whom everyone except his mother called Hopalong, it was Nooawlinz. For Bourgeois, known to all as Boo, it was Nooawynz. In New Orleans this marked a distinct social separation for these two roommates, standing at the Fair Grounds finish line at a gloomy March dawn.

That these two shared a small French Quarter apartment was a result of Boots slide from grace, not Finbar's climb to it. In New Orleans class category, Cassidy was a yat, a term used to describe working class whites. Yats speak in a dialect that is similar to Brooklynese except that it substitutes y'all for youse in the second person plural. The origin of the term lies in a common greeting heard on the streets, "Where y'at?" BOO belonged to the prominent Family LeCompte; he was not a yat. On its substantial tree, the family counted two Kings of Carnival, one governor of the state, and two convicted felons. His grandfather was one of each, with whom Boo shared only the last designation.

Boo was not a criminal type; his only legal blemish was a guilty plea to income tax evasion. A reasonable charge, he agreed, as he had failed to file returns from his thirty seventh to forty second year. It was upon release from six months at the minimum security penitentiary at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida that he met one Finbar "Hopalong" Cassidy.

On his first day of freedom, Boo visited the Pensacola Greyhound Track where Cassidy was selling tip sheets and serving a sentence, so to speak, of his own. While not technically ruled off, Hoppy was persona non grata at his favorite race track and previous place of employment, the New Orleans Fair Grounds.

The waistline of Hoppy's checkered Sansabelt slacks was grooved directly above a moderate sized paunch. The rest of his upper torso was covered by a banlon knit shirt. A pair of Hush Puppies on his feet complemented an ensemble that was a uniform for people of his age and class in New Orleans.

He reflected briefly on the seedy surroundings as he hawked his sheet. "Five winnas yestuhday, da double an two poifectas, Hoppys red hot, getcha picks right heah. Tree bucks, podnuh," he snapped, as he dealt a copy to Boo who recognized the unmistakable accent. "You are from Nooawynz awn't you?" he inquired politely.

"Yeah, you right, captain, and dats were I'm headed as soon as I sell out dese sheets." Boo surveyed his acquaintance figuring that whatever Hoppy drove it had to beat a bus.

"I'm on my way there myself, my car broke down. Could I hitch a ride if I help you with gas?" Whatever sense of class Boo had owned had been snatched by his jail time. Hoppy moved his eyes in every direction but Boo's, and rocked on his Hush Puppies weighing the offer. He then briefly studied the Bass Weejuns, pressed khakis, and pale blue

button down shirt making the proposition. Only Boo knew that the duffle bag he carried contained all his remaining possessions.

"You ain't queer or nuttin, huh? Wanna dem uptown dudes, right?" Boo acknowledged Hoppy's query with a nod. "Look podnuh, gimme twenny five an we outta heah." Boo gratefully obliged, and this most odd of couples set out on the four hour drive home in the somewhat limited comfort of Hoppy's 1978 Chrysler New Yorker.

Hoppy's heavy foot pushed the aged sedan down Interstate 10 with purpose while he divided his vision equally among his passenger, the road ahead, and the rearview mirror. He had been gone for almost a year, missed opening day at the track for the first time in twenty seven years, and was on his way home.

Anticipation of the Fair Grounds grandstand brought thoughts of raw oysters and corn beef, and moistened his lips. In his youth, bookmakers had lurked in the smoky catacombs there. His first job, at age sixteen, was as a runner for one of them. From that point forward, the track was his sense of place, his reckoning point.

"Love dat track, da Unfair Grounds, had foteen diffren jobs from pawkin tendant to assistant clocks for da Racin Form. Dat was da best, clockin." He had volunteered a biographical sketch without coaxing.

"Ever know a guy named Irving Cohn?" Boo asked. He was anxious to impress Hoppy with his racing knowledge.

"Oiv? Taught me all da tricks, best man I ever knew. Could clock a boss widout a watch, so help me. Straight up guy too. Always tole me we had a fidoosharary responsibility to the bettor."

"Fiduciary?" Boo interrupted with correct pronunciation.

"Yeah, dats it. He really believed dat stuff. Said da bettor might not trust da jock or da trainer, but he trusts da Racin Form."

"He was a legend alright," Boo agreed. "I remember when he died last year, they had a thing on the sports about what a great guy he was and all."

"Dats true, great guy. I let him down, that's how I ended up in P-cola wit da dogs. He caught me hidin woikouts for a trainer. After all dem speeches on trust an all, he liked to cry when he caught me. Only time he ever called me Finbar; dats my real name. Yeah, broke his hawt but he had to fire me." Hoppy's act of contrition seemed directed more at the hurt caused to his mentor than the deed itself.

Boo slid down in his seat vainly in search of comfort. "My first trip to the track was a debutante lunch when I was a student at Tulane. I had a fraternity brother from New

York; his family raced horses there. They knew Irv Cohn from Saratoga. That sheet you were selling, you write it?"

"Yeah, dem puppies, they sumpm else. Ya gotta betta shot wit da pea an tree shells. But da bosses? Dey can be beat." Hoppy nodded with assurance.

"I don't know anything about the dogs, but I totally agree with you about the horses. I've been developing a system since, uh, moving to Pensacola. It looks great on paper, but I'm a little short of capital."

"Don't feel like da Lone Ranger, Cuz. I'm runnin on empty my own self. But I'm gonna make stabs on a sheet at the F.G.; that'll at least keep me together til I hit da big gumbo."

"The big gumbo, what the hell is that?"

"Da Pick Six, my man. Biggest payoff an best percentage shota player's got. Better dan da lottry, video pokah, craps, you name it. I'm woikin on nailin dat mothah on Louisiana Doiby day. I know," he emphasized the word, "the winna of da big race, jus gotta get da udda five."

"Maybe we should collaborate, Hoppy." Boo sensed opportunity. Hoppy might be rough around the edges, but he obviously was track smart. "My system might well lead us to those other five winners. Its only weakness is it picks a lot of favorites." "Rotsa ruck on dis one, cap. Dis payday's gonna look like your zip code." Finbar Cassidy was not about to share his intelligence with a total stranger; he thought to himself that he might have said too much already. He didn't have a lot of time for uptown swells; but Boo, though he looked and talked like one, struck him as a straight up type. He was also increasingly curious about his system.

Boo pressed his sales pitch. "The best part is it usually eliminates three fourths of the horses in the race. It's great for the exotics, Hoppy. Especially the Pick Six!"

Hoppy pursed his lips, raised his brows, and shrugged as he weighed the proposition. What did he have to lose? He could get this guy to help him with the tip sheet, see how good his picks were, and then decide whether to let him in on the kill. It was still three weeks until Derby day.

The Pick Six is the most lucrative of race track exotic wagers, often producing six figure payoffs. The challenge is to pick the winner in six consecutive races, on most cards the third through eighth. If no one wins, the pool carries over to the following day. The cost per ticket is two dollars (one selection in each race) , but no serious bettor expects to win with one ticket.

To make multiple selections, the cost escalates rapidly. Total cost of a wager is the product of the number of selections per race multiplied by two dollars. Thus two

selections per race would cost $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 64 \times \$2 = \$128$. The addition of only one horse in one race would increase the total by fifty per cent or sixty four dollars. Consequently most bettors try to find at least one race in which to "single" a selection. Usually such horses are overwhelming favorites in supposed can't lose spots.

Hoppy's Pick Six plan called for a single in the Louisiana Derby. The morning line on his selection would be 30/1. "Tell ya what, Mistah Bourgeois, we go halfsy on da tip sheet. You an me. You sell em outside da clubhouse an I'll sell em by da granstan." The Fair Grounds grandstand was Hoppy's haunt; he knew its constituents. The uptown matrons going to the clubhouse wouldn't get pass Boo without a purchase, Hoppy thought.

"I'll take the grandstand side, if it's all the same to you, Hoppy . Less likely to run into .." Boo stopped in mid-sentence, trying to rephrase his thoughts.

Hoppy turned, and for the first time looked him straight in the eye. "You hidin from somebody or what, podnuh? I don't need no more problems den I got. I ain't up for no citizenship awards after that woikout stuff. If you in trouble or anything, dis deal ain't gonna fly."

For the next fifty miles, Boo spoke virtually without interruption. His life story included early years filled with privilege and indulgence. He recounted the Tulane years and his positions at numerous New Orleans stock brokerages. Finally he inhaled deeply through his mouth and for the first time told the story of the tax evasion. The embarrassment, he explained, at confronting family friends outside of the clubhouse, would be unbearable for him.

Hoppy was sympathetic, but somewhat baffled that someone like that thought they could get away without filing income tax returns. "Look , ace, everybody's got problems. I'll take the clubhouse. Sounds like you need a place to stay too. My brudda-in-law rented me uh efficiency in da quaddas. Halfa dat's a hunnert ana dime a month, in advance." Hoppy was unconcerned with Boo's past, present or future, except to the extent that his Pick Six chances were enhanced or diminished.

"Very kind of you Hoppy. It's a deal. With the accord complete, the two spent the rest of the trip designing the tip sheet. It would be called Hoppy's Heat and thanks to Hoppy's backstretch investigative skills and Boots system, it quickly rose to the top in percentage wins. Circulation was enough to cover rent, gas for the New Yorker, and most importantly bait for the mutuel windows. Their grubstake grew steadily and one week before the Louisiana Derby, the pool in the Pick Six was fifty thousand dollars and climbing. Hoppy prayed that no one hit it before Derby day.

Before dawn, Calvin Broussard sat confidently on his gray gelding, Dot, next to the clocker's stand above the far turn at the Fair Grounds. Doc had paid a lot of bills for Calvin in his younger days; in retirement, he was the stable exercise pony. Trainers named Broussard were commonplace in Louisiana; cajuns comprised a significant minority of the racetrack colony. Calvin's own speech was as sharp as cayenne pepper,

and he moved easily between the patois and the American dialect. Well anchored on his western saddle in natty western dress on the racetrack scape, only one thing about him was anomalous. Calvin Broussard was black. Calvin knew well the caste system of his profession. Blacks served in abundance as grooms and exercise riders; but as most owners were white, so were most trainers. At age fifty, for Calvin, the Fair Grounds was the big show, a far cry from the bush tracks in southwest Louisiana where he had ridden as a kid. His stable of claimers had him near, if never at, the top of trainers' standings wherever he raced in the state. This time, for the first time, he had a good horse.

Down the backstretch, Calvin studied a smallish three year old bay colt galloping toward him. The trainer massaged his thin black mustache and quietly gloried in the horse's fluid action. Three starts, three wins; Calvin Broussard, owner and trainer.

From the near empty grandstand, a pair of binoculars focused on the colt; Hoppy's eyes peered through the lenses. Oblivious to Calvin's charge, Boots thumb pressed on his stopwatch as he clocked the workout of a claimer finishing up three eighths of a mile: "Thirty five and two," he mumbled as he noted the particulars in his book.

Hoppy had organized that book exactly as Irv Cohn had taught him. Indexed by trainer's name, each horse stabled at the track had a page, complete with physical description. One page read at the top: Broussard, C. (purple saddlecloth, gold C.B.) Delahoussaye. After each trainer's name was the color and logo of the saddlecloth as well as the name of the usual exercise rider. Delahoussaye was Broussard's exercise rider and usual jockey. Directly below the rider's name, the page read: Cabildo Fire, three year old bay colt; white blaze, three white socks. At first light, all the information was often necessary for certain identification. It was a rare day that any horse had work without Hoppy's scrutiny.

Desormeaux "Dede" Delahoussaye had jockey written all over her pedigree. A pair of uncles, whose names she bore, were known to every racing fan in the country. She had started riding at Calvin Broussard's farm in Opelousas as a child, exercising horses for him there and eventually at the track. Race riding was her goal, but her mentor brought her along slowly. She became an apprentice rider under his direction and led that category in Louisiana. Dede had now progressed to the point that other stables were seeking her skills.

The rider took a strong hold of her mount as he galloped strongly to the head of the long Fair Grounds stretch. Hoppy relaxed his arms as he let the field glasses drop gently to their ready position above his midsection. His eyes closed partially and his nose wrinkled to gain a better focus on his subject.

"That one's sure on the muscle, Hoppy. Who's that?" Boo asked in total innocence.

"One uh Brewsawd's tree year oles." Hoppy was not about to give away the store at this point. There went the winner of the Louisiana Derby, and the less said the better. "Dat goil win two yestuhday, Booman. She can ride some and still got the bug."

Boo knew only too well. "Don't remind me. She beat me in the fourth with that ten to one chance. Who's she on anyway. Really going nice."

Hoppy dismissed the horse's credentials. "Dat Fire boss, sumpm Fire. Win a couple state bred races, dat's all."

State bred in this case meant Louisiana bred. In an effort to promote the local breeding industry many racing states use tax money to supplement purses for races restricted to home bred. They are generally considered of lesser quality than "open" races. The Louisiana Derby is open to any duly nominated thoroughbred of the age of three. Since no Louisiana bred ever won the race, they usually started at very long odds.

As she pulled her horse up, Dede's mind recalled that misty March morning at Calvin's farm when Cabildo Fire's feet first hit the ground. They had watched the colt rise on his unsteady legs.

"Dede, cent tell much when dey dis small, nut dat's a strong bebbby, yeah. It Strong was what she thought as he continued to pull as she eased. When he at last complied, they walked slowly past the clocker's stand. She was silent and non-committal in expression as she neared Calvin and his pony. She knew he was approaching the race perfectly, but knew it was not a subject for public discussion.

Dede had ridden the colt in all three of his career starts. In truth whatever riding skills she possessed had yet to be tested on him. Her task thus far had imply been to hold on as her colt had led gate to wire in all his races.

"Gimme da lowdown dere, freckle face." Calvin smiled broadly as he accompanied Dede and her charge back to the barn. They both spoke in low tones, but Dede's excitement was uncontained.

"Mister Cal, I don't know what's shippin in to run an I don't much care. This horse won't be beat."

Dede's bravado was typical of youth and jockeys. Calvin knew the colt had not faced the caliber of opposition awaiting him on Saturday. From California came Exile, a million dollar yearling by Seattle Slew. His two year old season had been cut short by injury after three straight wins. He was getting a late start as a three year old, but his connections hoped to use the Louisiana Derby as a stepping stone to Churchill Downs come May. From Florida came Checkered Flag, a full brother to champion A.P. Indy. Unrated at two, he had won three races in six weeks before an impressive third in the Florida Derby. These two towered over the rest of the field and would likely be the co-favorites in the betting.

When the last horse's work had been logged into the book, Hoppy dispatched Boo to the printer to collect the day's tip sheets. He tossed the keys to his partner and headed to the barn of Calvin Broussard for the first time in over a year. He winked a knowing hello to

Dede as she hustled to the jock's room. "Where y'at calveen?" Hoppy said with gusto as he thrust his hand forward, all fingers separated.

"My man. Where you been at? Tot you wuz in trouble or wise."

Calvin was a bit on edge. He hadn't seen him since his dismissal from the Racing Form. "Member dees guy, Hoppy?" Calvin asked as he nodded toward Cabildo Fire, who was enjoying a stream of warm water bouncing off him square between his eyes.

"Remember him, you kiddin or what? How could I forget him, he cost me my job.it Hoppy grinned as his glance went carefully up and down the horses front legs, checking for any disorders.

Calvin knew all too well of Hoppy's misfortune. He was not a big bettor, but he had known his unrated two year old was the goods. There had not been a doubt that the colt would win at first asking against Louisiana bred. If he could keep him under wraps, a very nice betting coup awaited. The problem was that all first time starters had to have at least two published workouts. Calvin had given the colt one easy one that drew little attention from the sharp eyes on the rails. He needed a harder work to get him ready to run; this is where Hoppy came in. He agreed to put another one of Calvin's horses name on the work tab. Neither Calvin nor Hoppy had done anything like it before, but both knew it was not an uncommon practice. It fooled everyone but Irv Cohn, who fired Hoppy on the spot. He then confronted Calvin; Irv told him he would not turn him into the stewards this time, but that there would be no second chance. Calvin wouldn't need one. The trainer felt he owed Hoppy for taking the fall in what was a joint compromise of honesty. When his precocious two year old trained on at three, he was anxious to tell Hoppy and finally found him in Pensacola. "Hoppy, you need to get yar ass over haref, yeah. My harse gonna win da big race, gonna pay a beeg price."

That was all the prodding Hoppy needed to come home. Watching the progress of the colt's bath, he bounced his weight from left to right. Rattling pocket change with one hand, tugging an ear lobe with the other, Hoppy smelled a big score. His eyes rolled as he cackled to Calvin, "Podnuh, we gonna get da groceries Saddy."

Hoppy was now in a limbo-like state as he awaited the Saturday edition of the Daily Racing Form. He felt like those horses in the gate waiting for the bell. The remaining hours crawled by with Boo and Hoppy reviewing the myriad mathematical possibilities for their Pick Six bets. The reality was that the pair had a little over six hundred dollars available for their betting coup. Money management was a close second to horse selection.

On Friday they left the track as soon as they sold out of tip sheets. Boo carried his Saturday form and program securely under arm as he hustled to the parking lot. Hoppy tried to keep up while reading his. The Pick Six pool stood at \$110,000; they prayed no one would hit it.

Few words were exchanged during their brief ride to the French Quarter. Hoppy weaved through the traffic on Esplanade Avenue with a Precision mastered over years of making post time deadlines. He swooped hawklike onto an unexpected parking place that appeared around the corner from their modest digs.

Inside the task was quickly joined and with it Boots entrance into Hoppy's confidence. "Boo man, da Doiby winna, I am here to tell ya is none udda dan Cabildo Fire. Dat colt is wound tigha dan Dick's hatband. We get da udda five we got da Pick Six."

Boo was shocked at the pick but unwavering in support. "Hoppy, if you told me Mr. Ed was going to win the Derby, I'd bet him. I know a pro when I see one."

The Louisiana Derby was written as the eighth race on Saturdays card and thus the last leg of the Pick Six. Analysis of the prior five races ground on through hours of chicory coffee. After balancing the bankroll with the selection probabilities, a plan was born. The third and fourth races (first two of the Pick Six) each appeared to be two horse contests. Both Hoppy's handicapping and Boo's system agreed that two picks in each race would be used. The fifth and six race were more wide open affairs. Three picks would be needed in each of those to cover likely possibilities. The seventh was impossible: a field of two year old maiden claimers.

Boo acknowledged that his system was least effective in these situations; Hoppy knew the pitfalls of maiden events as well. They spent seven selections and still they felt most vulnerable in this race. The eighth being the Derby, no further study was required. Boo was beginning to have second thoughts about singling Cabildo Fire.

"For what it's worth, Hoppy, the system picks Exile. Maybe we should have a little insurance just in case."

Hoppy's voice rose. "We got da Doiby in our pocket. No system, no insurance. Unnahstan?" His authority and confidence ended the discussion. There would be but one selection in the eighth. The final betting scheme was complete. The Pick Six would be bet $2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 7 \times 1 = 252 \times 2 = \504 . With a little over six hundred in their stash, there would be enough left to bet a hundred to win on Cabildo Fire.

The pair was on duty for Saturday's morning work but their minds were hours ahead. They chronicled the activity with rare disinterest. With three hours to the first race, they scurried from the track to collect the tip sheets from the printer. As he set up for the day's business in front of the track, Hoppy worried briefly that selecting Cabildo Fire for the tip sheet might suppress the odds. He dismissed the worry with the thought that most of his customers were two dollar bettors and with the biggest betting handle of the year, their wagers would be meaningless. Besides, he took pride in seeing his sheet at the top of the rankings.

His eager regulars and once a year race goers cleaned out his inventory by the first race. He bobbed and weaved through the crowd heading for his perch at the finish line. Boo was waiting there with an armful of tip sheets.

"Sorry Hoppy. I stayed there 'til the first. I got nervous thinking about the bet. I had to get over here."

"Podnuh, dem sheets is peanuts next to da score we're gonna make today."

Hoppy went directly to the mutuel window and carefully place their Pick Six wager. Boo fidgeted nervously nearby.

"Boo , you actin' like some kinda jennywoman. Relax my man, relax. Let's go watch the third."

As they returned to their familiar spot, two strangers stood there in conversation. The short round one balanced a beer and a hot dog in his right hand while he cradled an unlit cigar with his left.

The taller one stared at Hoppy's sheet over the round one's shoulder: "If they got the winners, why they gotta sell tip sheets? You figure it out."

Unconcerned with this attack on his profession, Hoppy nodded upward in their direction and grinned knowingly to Boo. He then placed his index finger over his lips as a caution to Boo not to engage them. Boo hadn't heard a word. His nervousness was exploding as the horses neared the gate for the third race, first leg of the Pick Six.

Boo relaxed temporarily as their two selections ran away from the rest of the field. The fourth was equally lacking in suspense as one of their two picks one easily. The fifth and six were much different. Their selections prevailed by the narrowest of margins over unpicked entries. As Hoppy's confidence grew, so did Boo's anxiety. Four down, two to go.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of picking maiden claimers, they had seven of the twelve entries covered and felt secure as the seventh race neared. They were not. As the horses broke from the gate in the seventh race, four first time starters created a melee that unseated two riders. Another collision through the stretch caused the stewards inquiry light to flash as soon as the horses passed the finish line. The four horses in the photo included two picked and two unpicked horses. No one had a clue who would be declared the winner.

"I handicap a horse race and I get a rodeo," moaned Hoppy. "I don't know why I do dis to myself. Ain't no justice, none." Boo's trance continued as they awaited the results. The verdict made a 50-1 chance the winner. When the number went up, Hoppy released a roar that even his unruly neighbors took notice of. He gripped Booby the neck which seemed to unlock his glazed expression. "We in, Boo man, we in," he said in a lower tone

as he gathered his composure. Boo smiled faintly, looking like a man getting absolution on his deathbed.

In spite of all the preparation, in spite of all the bravado about systems, Hoppy and Boo exchanged expressions of disbelief at their good fortune. Hoppy really believed the Derby was a lock, Boo was less sure.

In the paddock, Calvin Broussard waited with the other owners and trainers for the entrants in the Louisiana Derby. As the riderless colts ambled into the walking ring, their connections watched with admiration and dreams of Kentucky in May. No horse had completed a Louisiana-Kentucky Derby parlay since Black Gold in 1924. Only Calvin and Dede saw the Louisiana Derby as the goal not a stepping stone; to them, the Kentucky Derby occupied another cosmos.

Calvin cinched the girth on his colt's saddle and turned, stealing a look at the odds board where Dede's eyes were already fixed. "Tirty fie to one, young lady. Dis could be a lot of fun. You know you be on da lead, there. Keep a good bolt goin down da backside. When you get to da top of the lane, axe him to run and pray dey don't catch ya." With that piece of wisdom imparted, the paddock judge cried riders up. Calvin grabbed Dede's outstretched boot and flipped her onto the saddle. She exchanged his toothy grin with a wink as the bugler called the horses to the track.

As the band struck up "You Are My Sunshine," Dede felt the sun break out over her shoulder, warming the slight chill in her body. At the end of the post parade, Cabildo Fire broke into an easy lope, a picture of composure. The two favorites, Exile and Checkered Flag, galloped by her boldly, their riders oblivious to her mount.

Dede's mouth felt suddenly dry, her legs a little rubbery. As she reduced the colt to a walk toward the starting gate, the importance of the moment was lost on the colt and came crashing down on the rider. Her hands trembled and a mild case of nausea seized her as an assistant starter led the partners into the number three hole.

Dede's legs tensed as the last horse was led into the starting gate. Cabildo Fire stood motionless except for a shift of his weight from left to right. "Yeah, yeah. all in!" an assistant starter shouted to the head starter, staring imperiously from his platform starting buzzer in hand. When he squeezed the buzzer, the gates opened, and Cabildo Fire exploded from the gate in typical fashion.

Coming down the stretch the first time, just off the rail, the colt enjoyed a length and a half lead on the rest of the field. Dede's reins were slack and as the horse relaxed, so did she. It felt, she thought, just like an early morning gallop.

"Runnin poifect, Boo, got tons of horse my man. Da lady's got a hold on him." Hoppy's hands were steady on his binoculars. Boo's palms were damp, his hands lurching out of control inside his pockets. A few yards away, Calvin watched impassively from the owners and trainers stand.

A half mile from home, Dede felt the presence of another horse. A quick peek under her arm revealed two challengers, one on either side. She remembered her uncles' advice: always give your horse a breather between the start and the stretch run when you are on the lead; save some horse for the drive. Great advice, she thought, but there were two class horses looming on her horse's flanks. Nevertheless she gently took the colt back, letting the pair nearer. She wondered what would happen next. Cabildo Fire had never raced over a mile and he had never been headed in the stretch. All that was about to change.

As the field swept passed the mile marker, the announcer's cadence became more urgent. "And they move into the straight, three of them across the track. Cabildo Fire showing the way by a head, Exile on the rail, and Checkered Flag gaining on the outside." Time to ask for the big run, Dede thought. She pumped her hands and chirped to her mount. His response was a surge like the one he gave leaving the gate.

Just as he was opening a lead, it happened. Suddenly the colt bobbed and his head disappeared from Dede's view. She saw nothing but track in front of her. She felt weightless and realized she must be going down. Just as quickly, Cabildo Fire's head popped back up and she returned to the saddle with a thud. Trying to right himself, he lurched toward the rail just as Exile was trying to slip through. Dede leaned rightward, dug her left heel into his flank, and gave a tug with the right rein. As the colt steadied, she popped her whip twice left handed. By now Exile and Checkered Flag had passed Cabildo Fire's head and half his body. He dug in with all his strength; as the three horses approached the wire, he made up ground inch by agonizing inch.

At the finish line, Dede's head was down, arms thrust forward. Her horse's head protruded as if extending through a fence to a blade of grass. She knew her horse had given his all; what she didn't know was whether they were first, second, or third. One bad step, she thought, had kept them from a clear win. She exchanged expressionless glances with the other two riders. None raised a whip in victory or thrust a fist into the air.

In fact no one at the Fair Grounds was sure who won except Finbar Cassidy. "Get in line, my man!" he screamed at Boo. "We win it by a finger nail. You can book it."

As it turned out, you could have booked it. But no sooner than the posting of the official order of finish (Cabildo Fire, Exile, Checkered Flag) came the illumination of the dreaded flashing sign: Stewards! Inquiry.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer intoned. "Please hold all parimutuel tickets. The results are not official." The stewards had seen the eventful stumble at the eighth pole and suspected that Cabildo Fire's railward lurch might have impeded the racing path of Exile. If so, the order of finish of the first two would be reversed and Hoppy's tickets would be so much race track confetti. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Hoppy muttered through clenched teeth with a blend of defiance and prayer. "For once in my life I got a shot to get out da trap an I get a stew's inquiry. It ain't fair, it ain't fair."

Boo continued his catatonic stare, seemingly entranced by the blinking characters on the board. It was only when Hoppy darted into the grandstand that he broke out of his stoop shouldered stare and followed like a duckling. They stopped underneath a television monitor where an intensely interested group of bettors had gathered. The group watched the rerun of the race with craned necks and mouths agape, like so many infant birds waiting to be fed.

Anticipating the outcome, they began chanting their preferences. "Take down the three, put up the five boss (Exile) ," one man yelled. "Take 'em both down, put up the eight (Checkered Flag)," hooted another. "Puleez leave da tree up. For once in my life, puleez gawdamighty puleez," Hoppy moaned mostly to himself. He was not the self pitying type but the injustice of his situation wore heavily. Boo stood mute and motionless transferring his hypnotic stare from the tote board to the television monitor.

Outside Calvin watched nervously as the first three finishers were led by their grooms in a circular walk, riders aboard. All participants were silent, but Dede managed a weak smile for her mentor as she went by him.

When at last the decision came, the inquiry light went out and all eyes were fixed on the board. The unofficial order of finish continued blinking momentarily. Then the blinking stopped, the official sign was lit, the order left unchanged. The announcer then confirmed what everyone already knew: the winner of the Louisiana Derby was Cabildo Fire. What only two people knew was that Finbar Cassidy and Bourgeois LeCompte had just hit the Pick Six.

Hoppy walked with a swagger as he moved to the cashier. The awakened Boo was a step behind.

"Hoppy, this is a lot of money. We should get them to issue us checks." Boo's silence was broken by a sober piece of advice. A massive roll of hundred dollar bills held no appeal for him.

To Hoppy the win was a watershed event that offered to change his life. To Boo, it was a transfusion, a grubstake that would be a bridge back to his proper station in life. A bag full of hundred dollar bills sounded just fine to Hoppy: "Podnuh, you can axe for whatever. Me, I'm takin' da pitchers of da presidents."

In the winner's circle, Cabildo Fire posed for the photographer, ears propped. Calvin and Dede, decades apart in age, shared the common bond of their first stakes win. They focused briefly on the infield grave of Black Gold. Flashes of Kentucky went unmentioned through their minds. As the photographer framed his shot, the usual group of hangers on typical of such occasions was missing. Only jockey, trainer, horse, and groom were present. It could have been the last race on a rainy Wednesday, except for the blanket of roses over the colt's withers.

As Hoppy approached the cashier's window reserved for large transactions, he was surprised to see a line taking form. He concluded that a few of the local smarts must have made large show bets on the two favorites. Boo was anxious to know exactly what the payday would be. "The payday, my boy, is one hundred fifteen large plus whatever dese suckers pumped into da pool today. Another twenty gees or so."

Boo was unsure. "How do you know we have the only winning ticket? We may be splitting this up a dozen ways."

"Look around dis place. Calvin's boss pay sixty five bucks for a deuce. Now I axe yah, who's got him in da Pick Six? You and me, pal."

As the line at the window grew, the announcer spoke. "Today's Pick Six had a total pool of one hundred thirty thousand dollars. With twenty winning tickets sold, the winning payoff is six thousand five hundred dollars."

Hoppy grabbed his crotch as if reaching for a lifeline. "What da fuh, dis ain't right. I gotta have da only winning ticket. I gotta!"

"You ain't gotta have diddly," said the familiar face with the cigar and the hot dog. "I got it. All dese people got it. Tip sheet give it out today, Hoppy's Heat. Bought it for tree bucks. Blew da foist two, den he pick six straight includin da doiby."

A copy of the tip sheet, soiled by a footprint, lay on the ground. Boo picked it up. There it was, Hoppy's Pick Six: 4-3-6-2-1-3. One two dollar proposition and nineteen faithful customers had taken it and won.

Boo was incredulous. "All the work we put into this and you give it out on the tip sheet?"

"I didn't give it all out, Boo. Only my best shot in each race, like I do every day. I never dreamed it would hit." Hoppy's disappointment was dwarfed by Boo's despair.

The cashier counted out a pile of hundred dollar bills to Hoppy. He separated them into equal stacks, one of which he handed to Boo. "Here's your piece, my man. Guess I'll see ya around."

Hoppy doubted he would. Boo counted the bills carefully, wrapped his fist around them, and with no acknowledgment to Hoppy, asked a guard to escort him to a cab.

Hoppy headed for the parking lot, stopping long enough to pick up the next day's form. A light, cold rain began to fall. He cradled the paper in his arm, flipped the collar on his jacket, and shrugged his shoulders in an attempt to keep Racing Form and body dry.

Hoppy thought about how much money held almost won. He shook his head in bemusement, then realized he had more money in his pocket than he'd ever had in the bank. He thought about the people that bought his sheet; they must have trusted him.

They might not trust the trainers, they might not trust the jockeys, but they trusted Finbar Cassidy. Fiduciary responsibility, his lips mouthed silently. Irv would understand.

He unlocked the New Yorker and rolled into the driver's seat. He opened the form and glanced at the next day's entries before leaving the track. Tomorrow, Hoppy thought, he'd better tell the printer to increase his order.