

Dead Cert

Tiger Yang at thirty-seven knew he was over the hill as a jockey. The skill and daring that had made him champion jockey of Hong Kong on no fewer than seven occasions were no longer what they used to be. The split second timing required to capitalise on openings in the straight or to lunge for the line in a tight finish did not always come off. Trainers no longer offered him the pick of their stables and racing commentators no longer gave his exploits their former prominence. Before long, younger and hungrier riders would elbow him out of the limelight. But in order to hang up his stirrups with some assurance of a comfortable future required one last great betting coup.

Tiger analysed again the field for the crucial race on Saturday at Happy Valley. Dead Cert, that grey Irish gelding he was riding, had everything going for it -- fitness, distance, mediocre opposition and, most importantly, juicy odds. Even the slight drizzle falling outside, if it continued for another day, could add to its advantage. He had planned and waited for this coup for more than a year and if the horse was ever going to live up to its name, it would be in the 1,800 meter cup race. He had felt sufficiently confident of the outcome to telephone his former mentor, Boots O'Neal, to fly up from Australia.

Tiger smiled a twisted smile of satisfaction as he continued with his studies. Tiger, of course, was not his original name. It was a nickname bestowed by fellow students in primary school because of his combativeness. He had much to be combative about in those days. Not only was he poor and shoddily dressed, but his harelip, his foreshortened body and his bandy legs made him a natural target for bullies.

But no bully ever got away cheaply. He gave almost as good as he got. "That damn tyke fights like a tiger," was a rueful observation made by an older boy who had attempted to take advantage of him. Thereafter the name stuck.

Those early experiences had built up his strength and his sinews so much that his diminutive body became as tough as a solid rubber ball. His chest and arm muscles became massive in relation to the rest of his frame. In spite of his awkward physique, he had a wonderful sense of balance and had excelled at gymnastics. Those two qualities stood him in good stead when he became an apprentice jockey. Once he started riding professionally he never had to look back.

His talents should have brought him fortune as well as fame, except that two unfortunate circumstances conspired against his retaining any significant amount of the vast sums he earned. The first occurred nine years ago when he was at the height of his prowess. His mother, a former seamstress who had brought him up single-handedly after his father had deserted them, suffered a massive stroke.

It left her a virtual vegetable, without powers of speech, movement or memory. But because she was the only person who had ever loved him and whom he had ever loved, he had insisted upon the best medical attention that money could buy. He wanted desperately to make up for all the sacrifices she had made for him. But the best efforts of the most expensive doctors had been to no avail. She could neither recognise him nor respond to his voice or touch. She simply lay inert on the hospital bed until she finally died two years ago. The cost of maintaining her in a private ward for seven years had been staggering.

The second misfortune was linked to the first. Once deprived of the care and affection of his mother, Tiger felt unbearably lonely and lost. There was no want of hangers-on to ply him with women and other forms of diversion. But he was painfully aware of their motives and of his own unattractiveness.

Because of his harelip, his face seemed to be set permanently in a snarl. He seldom spoke because when he did the words would come out as an untidy lisp, accompanied by a spray of spittle. The nose above the harelip was far from becoming. It was broad and flat, with nostrils thick with hair. His intelligent eyes were shadowed with torment, as if they were always prepared to endure new forms of pain. It did not require much imagination to sense that the women who sometimes kept his company were ashamed to be seen in public with someone so grotesque. The cheers of punters hardly provided consolation in the solitary darkness of the night.

But despite what his intelligence told him, he could not set aside his gnawing hunger for love and happiness. His secret hope was that he might one day come across a woman who could love him as he was, as his mother had done. He did not even require that the person be worthy of his love. She could be from any estate, so long as she cared genuinely for him. But even that proved a forlorn hope. He encountered only purveyors of counterfeit love, wearing smiles with no roots in happiness and proffering passion calibrated to the size of their fees. He paid dearly and suffered horribly for those liaisons. Each failure merely spurred him more desperately on to the next.

Tiger felt no bitterness, however, over money wasted upon so many unworthy women. He was no saint himself and money was the most commonly understood language in Hong Kong. Fools and their money were destined to part. Others had taken advantage of him just as he had taken advantage of gullible punters. He supposed there was some kind of poetic justice in all that. Somehow it all balanced out.

After Tiger had finished his calculations, he went over to his video machine to replay the tapes of races by Dead Cert and the other entries in the field. He wanted to be sure that their previous runs had not revealed something he had

missed. Boots O'Neal, that legendary Australian jockey, had taught him caution as well as all the tricks of his trade. He was now sending for his old mentor to help him with his coup, to place the bets that could not be traced back to him. In the process he had hoped to repay some of his debt of gratitude.

He remembered how Boots had taken him in hand when he was a fresh apprentice. He had only ridden two winners whereas Boots was already a famous name around the racetracks on three continents. Boots had offered him a ride on one of his regular mounts because he was committed to the favourite in the same race.

"I like your style, kid," Boots had said. "You'll go a long way if you can follow instructions. I'm giving you a chance to show what you can do. Your ride hasn't got a hope, but I'd like you to act as pacemaker. Take your horse out front and let it run at its own pace. I'll be right behind you. When you get into the straight go all out, so you won't get into trouble with the stipes. I'll overtake you at the right time, so don't worry about me."

Tiger had felt enormously flattered that such a renowned jockey had praised his riding and had offered him a ride. He accepted with alacrity.

Then Boots had added: "If you want to make some money, put something on my horse. It can't lose."

"But we're not suppose to bet on races we are riding in."

Boots had laughed. "You've got a lot to learn, kid. Do you think we get up before dawn for track work every day, come rain or shine, starve ourselves silly to keep our weight down, risk life and limb every time we climb on a horse, just to earn our paltry riding fees? We do that for the folding stuff, kid. Of course we have to be discreet, but Hong Kong is the honey pot. It is the El Dorado of the sport of kings. It has the biggest tote pool in the world. The betting that's done here is so massive that you could do a coup without anyone noticing. That's why everyone wants to come here to top up their pension funds. That's why I'm here. Have no illusions, kid."

Following that conversation Tiger surreptitiously put all his savings on the favourite. He intended giving his mother a magnificent surprise with the proceeds. So during that race he followed instructions to the letter. But far from Boots overtaking him in the straight, Boots had ended unplaced, whereas his own horse had won at long odds. That win had left him trembling with anxiety. Not only had the surprise for his mother vanished but his savings had been wiped out.

That evening, Boots asked him out for a drink.

"What happened?" Tiger asked bitterly.

"It lost."

"You said it couldn't lose!"

"You look dejected. You had money on it?"

"Yes! Damn it!"

"A lot?"

"Enough."

Boots thereupon pushed over an envelope, saying: "Here are your winnings, kid. They ought to more than cover your losses."

"But your horse lost."

"I didn't bet on my horse. I backed yours. Don't you think it's smarter to win at thirty to one than at two to one? You've just learnt your first important lesson, kid. On the racetracks you trust no one, not even your own father. Remember that when you have a good thing going yourself. And remember Boots too."

That evening marked the beginning of his long association with Boots. Over the years he learnt many things from that wily veteran. He learnt all the ways of losing a race without being caught. He also learnt a number of maxims. One was that a jockey should ride to the best of his ability most of the time or else he would start losing rides. Another was that a jockey with real talent should not get involved with betting syndicates because there was no accounting for the judgement, honesty or greed of others. Yet another was that if a jockey ever needed really big money then he must be prepared to betray everybody.

Tiger thought about those maxims in relation to Saturday's race. He needed big money now and he justified what he was about to do by his hard apprenticeship, his twenty years in the saddle, his riding accidents, his broken bones and torn muscles and, most of all, by the loneliness and the unspeakable emptiness of life as a riding machine.

As Tiger watched the replays he knew for certain that he had prepared his coup well. He had misled everybody about the capabilities of Dead Cert. The gelding had won a couple of sprints during its first season. Thereafter it had failed dismally over similar races. A season back he had been given the ride by the owner in the hope of a change of luck. But he could manage no better than fifth in that race.

However, it had not taken him long to realise Dead Cert was not a sprinter. Although it was capable of a burst of speed, its action was more that of a stayer. It had probably won the sprints because it was young and fresh at the time, but as it matured it could no longer match the early speed of natural sprinters. But somehow both trainer and owner had continued to take the horse for a sprinter and had kept it struggling over the sprints.

The opportunity for developing a "sleeper" for a rainy day dawned on him at once. Far from disabusing either trainer or owner of their mistaken notions, he had gone out of his way to confirm their opinion of the horse being a sprinter. He suggested that the horse might be turning sour by too much racing and offered to regulate its regime for a time to try to bring it back into the winner's circle.

Having thus delighted the connections, he had set about confirming his initial assessment. He got Dead Cert entered for staying races and on the first two occasions had burnt it out early to reinforce the general impression that it was a sprinter. He then systematically tested it for stamina, for the type of going preferred and for the duration of its final rush. But he always ran it to ensure it did not win by accident.

By now he knew the temperament of the horse as if it were his own. He had catalogued all its traits in his head. The animal was lazy by nature and would merely plod along unless hard ridden. It disliked the whip and would duck and break stride when hit. It also tended to be easily distracted, so blinkers were required to enhance its performances. But most important of all, it had a tremendous fighting heart and could produce a powerful finish in a staying race if properly held up in the early stages.

But he conveyed none of this to anyone. Instead he wove a web of misinformation around the horse. On occasion he would ask the owner to back Dead Cert heavily though he knew it had not the ghost of a chance. Afterwards he would blame the failure on the horse's lack of fighting spirit or the unsuitability of the going. He would drop hints to racing reporters that Dead Cert was nothing more than an unguine and temperamental sprinter. Over time, as the horse tumbled down the long handicaps, he knew he had a horse that could win in a common canter in a staying race against any company in its class.

Tiger switched off the video machine at the end of the replays. He went over in his mind the mechanics of the coup. Boots would arrive on Friday evening and he had a hundred thousand dollars locked away in a drawer ready to be handed over. As a precaution he would not tell Boots the horse to bet on till the following morning. That would minimize any slip of the lip and he should be able to count on odds of sixty or seventy to one. It would more than set him up for life.

On the day of the race, Tiger arrived at the racetrack in high spirits, though the set snarl on his face revealed nothing out of the ordinary. There was a capacity crowd at the racetrack and he felt a lively tingle in his blood. The conditions were even better than he had expected. The official going was yielding and the pre-post odds on Dead Cert were almost eighty to one. He felt certain of a killing.

In the race Dead Cert jumped cleanly and Tiger soon had it nicely positioned on the rails, behind the pacemakers. The first thousand meters went like a dream. As the field entered the straight, the front runners were tiring and began to fan out. Tiger, sitting fourth, saw an opening and he made his move. Dead Cert responded gallantly.

Suddenly, one of the horses in front stumbled and fell. Dead Cert cannoned against the fallen horse and fell as well. That sent Tiger catapulting over its

neck. As he hurtled through the air he knew in a flash that his problems would soon be over and that gave rise to an absurd desire to laugh.

He then landed on the side of his head. He heard a crack and the thunder of hooves all around him. A ringing reverberated in his ears and at the same moment he felt at peace. He realised he had ridden his pale horse not to the fortune he had expected but to the release of death. For him that too was a winner of sorts.

Dead Cert has appeared in **The Peak** magazine in Hong Kong and has been included in a textbook for senior secondary English students published by **Star Publishing Limited** of Hong Kong