

## Tic Tok Tail

Simon won the state lottery for the first time in his life—two hundred sixty thousand bucks after taxes. Upon learning this, even though it was midnight, Simon immediately called his most trusted friends, Alvin and Theo. “You gotta come over.” ... “Not over the phone. Hurry, you won’t believe this shit.”

At twenty-four, living at home embarrassed Simon, as did his grade-school nickname. The silly labels stuck, shaping the group’s bond.

Simon didn’t earn much working at Theo’s used comic book store. Now he could move into his own place. But this meeting at his mom’s house was a good precaution. While not the brightest guy in the room, he knew that such a windfall could not be mentioned in Alibis, the corner bar.

Fifteen minutes later, Alvin and Theo spread out on a paisley sofa covered in thick plastic. Four rounds of bourbon shots later, they’d ruled out: cryptocurrency, no one understood it; mutual funds, no one trusted it; exotic sports cars, they argued about which was fastest.

After a fifth round, Simon offered a more practical option—buy a racehorse.

Simon’s rich uncle, Jim, owned Quicksilver Farms, a training center in Kentucky. He was a straight shooter who could provide the advice they needed. Simon called and switched to speakerphone.

Uncle Jim had somehow developed a thick southern accent since moving from the Bronx. He answered with a growl: “Goddamn, Simon, it’s one in the morning! This better be good, boy.” Jim’s mood definitely sounded angrier with the drawl.

Simon summoned his best attempt at a sober apology. “Sooo sorry, Uncle. Won all this money and thought of you right away. I wanna buy a racehorse.”

Jim’s tone magically changed. “Wait. How much did you win?”

“Over a quarter million,” Simon whispered for no good reason.

“Dollars?” Jim whistled. “That’s the right neighborhood but owning a stakes-quality horse ain’t easy. How ‘bout you come on down? I’ll show you a few nice steeds, and we can talk about what you’d be getting yourself into.”

Everyone in the living room raised their eyebrows and shot glasses. Simon’s voice jumped an octave as he blurted out, “Thanks a million, Uncle Jim! I’ll book a flight first thing in the morning.” He looked at his friends and grinned. “Uh, can I bring my buddies, Alvin and Theo? They might wanna chip in too.”

“You can bring Minnie and Mickey for all I care. Just try to sober up before you come. You sound a little hammered.”

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The next day, they rented a red Mustang convertible at the airport. Their top-down drive up the dirt road to Quicksilver covered them in dust. Uncle Jim stood proudly on his porch, tending to his Big Green Egg grill.

He gave a big wave and yelled. “Gonna treat you to my famous BBQ. Don’t worry, it’s not horse.”

After a great smoked brisket meal, they all adjourned to his country-style parlor for some deliciously smooth Kentucky Owl Confiscated Bourbon, a far cry from the gut-rot they drank at home. Jim tucked himself into his easy chair and kicked up the footrest. Everyone but Jim rushed through their drinks and sat in a thick silence, until he finally spoke.

He swirled his glass and inhaled the fumes. “You guys know anything about thoroughbreds?”

Simon mirrored Jim’s actions but with an empty glass. “Not really. “We were hoping you’d teach us.”

Jim poured each of them another inch of amber. “Well, buying a stakes-quality horse is just the beginning. You have your boarding fees, training fees, country fair circuit expenses, track costs, vet, and farrier charges. Hell, you can easily piss away another hundred grand a year.” He waved at his red-faced visitors, adding, “I hope you three are well-healed. Heard there’s a fortune to be made in comic books.”

Theo sucked some stuck brisket from between his teeth. “I own the business and barely make a living after paying these two. Most of our sales are online. I’m thinking of closing the store.”

Jim bit his lip. “On-line, huh?” Under another heavy silence, he topped off their drinks.

Simon leveled with his uncle. “I didn’t win this money in a casino. It was a five-dollar lottery ticket. We don’t have any real money after that.” His stare dropped to the floor. “Sorry to waste your time.”

Jim patted Simon’s shoulder. His voice was gentle. “Y’all look beat. Let’s sleep on this, and we’ll kick an idea of mine around in the morning. The group’s faces brightened.

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At five a.m., Simon woke to a rooster’s medley that lasted at least ten minutes. He tried to sleep, but the scene with Uncle Jim played with his mind. What new idea would Uncle present to them? Was it an opportunity, or another embarrassment in front of his best friends?

That damned rooster must have brought others for harmony. Simon couldn’t take it any longer. He rolled out of bed and looked out the window.

A crescent moon cast a glow onto the path from the front lawn to what looked like a large barn. Uncle Jim stood midway, his back to Simon. Head lowered and shoulders shaking, Simon couldn’t tell if Jim was crying or laughing.

*Either way, looks like Uncle is losing it.* Not a good sign for Jim’s new proposition.

Simon dressed and set out to see what Jim was up to at this ungodly hour. A balmy breeze carried a hint of manure—definitely a stable.

The main door was ajar, and Simon peeked inside. His uncle crouched in front of the stall on the far end of the building. Now, arms waving, Jim appeared to be having a conversation. Although Simon couldn't make out the words, one detail knotted his stomach: Jim addressed the wrong end of the horse. When the tail draped over the stall fence, Simon made a hasty retreat to the house, his hopes for Jim's idea withering with each step.

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Simon tried to shower away his hangover and any trace of horseshit while waiting for a civil hour to wake his friends. How would he explain his crazy uncle to Alvin and Theo? This might not be the investment he was looking for, but it would make for a classic story. He should have consulted his mom. It was her brother. She had to have known Uncle was becoming unhinged.

Later that morning, as Simon finished dressing, there was a knock on his door. His two friends were dressed but looked like the Old Kentucky Owl had kicked their asses.

"Can we get some caffeine?" Theo begged. Simon was glad to postpone talking about his Uncle and nodded.

They descended the staircase, following the fragrance of freshly brewed coffee mixed with bacon grease. Jim greeted them, fork in hand. "Mornin' gents. I hope y'all slept well. This country air's healthy but can tucker you out."

Jim plated breakfast and poured the coffee with the same smile he left everyone with last night. He swallowed a bite of scrambled eggs and said, "I'm guessin' you all gave up on owning a racehorse."

The three would-be investors glanced at each other and shook their heads. Theo said, "I don't see how we could afford it." His friends didn't argue.

Jim yawned and stretched. "You'll have to excuse me. Been up most of the night. Too keyed up."

Simon and his friends sat quietly, waiting for more.

"Let's go to the stables. There's something you need to see to believe."

Intrigue trumped hunger. Abandoning their breakfasts, everyone followed Jim down the path toward the stables.

Uncle led them past the most muscular specimens of horses they'd ever seen, albeit only on TV shows. He bragged, "These guys are my bread and butter. They're worth anywhere from fifty grand to over a million bucks."

He continued walking to the last stall and pulled a handful of sugar cubes from his pocket. "Come ere, Genius," he yelled.

He turned to Simon. "Old boy's hard of hearing, but that brain's amazing."

The geriatric swayback turned a full 180 degrees, revealing a sorry pile of fur-covered bones awaiting the glue factory. Jim fed him the sugar. "Sugar's off limits to the youngbloods, but old Genius here has earned his keep."

Alvin asked, “Was he a champ back in the day?”

“Never won a race.” Jim patted the steed on the nose. “Back in his prime, we had experimented with some chemical enhancements. He was our guinea pig. Nothin to lose.”

Simon squinted. “You want us to invest in *this*?”

Jim entered the stall and winked. “Watch this.” He turned Genius around, tail facing his audience, and yelled. “Two plus two!”

The horse raised his tail and, clear as can be, tooted four distinct times.

The three burst into laughter but quieted when Jim yelled, “Three times two!”

Another correct answer silenced the group.

“Square root of twenty-five!” Without even a pause to think, five farts replied.

Simon poked Uncle Jim in the chest. “OK. What’s the trick?”

Jim nodded. “I know. I know. It’s amazing. One of the performance drugs we gave him. He’s no Mr. Ed, but I’ve made a small fortune on barroom bets.”

Theo crossed his arms. “You trying to sell us this horse, Jim?” His tone was wary.

Jim pointed to a barn door. “Smells a little ripe in here. Let’s take this outside.”

They sat out back on bales of hay, and Jim continued. “I’m not going to be greedy. For only one hundred thou, we can all be partners in Genius. Put the rest of your money to good use—maybe government bonds or somethin.”

Simon took a deep breath of fresh air. “Mom always said if it sounds too good to be true...”

“Here’s what I want from you guys. You seem to know your stuff with the internet. I’m a dinosaur. How can we make old Genius here an internet star?”

Theo elbowed his friends, and they all answered in unison. “TikTok.”

Simon gave a fist salute. “This horse will go viral.”

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A year later, Jim built an estate on the farm for his three partners, featuring a full recording studio for Genius. The horse was world-famous, and nobody even cared if he was actually doing math.

As Uncle Jim put it, “Even a horse’s ass can make a fortune if he’s also a stable genius.”

The End