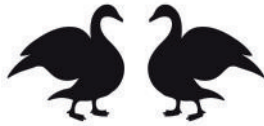


GORDON A. GRAVES

## RUN OF LUCK



Jordan Brodum left the air-conditioned comfort of his respectable upper middle-class home in the suburbs. He felt for the switch. The garage door grumbled as it rose, letting in the fresh, bright, early afternoon sun. He hoped the noise would not alert his wife.

In the mingled odors of the close damp garage, he leaned against his wife's several year old Japanese car, while he pulled on his top of the line running shoes. He wanted no delays in his departure this Sunday. To the bone he felt that this would be his lucky day.

The children's plastic toys littered the driveway. He waited for the brats to circulate into the backyard.

He heard Betsy bellow, "Mom, Billy's doing it again!"

That would, Jordan decided, keep his wife occupied for the needed interval. He started his run slowly, letting his muscles limber up.

He trotted down his drive, and turned right on Oak Street. Just a few strides took him behind old man Ossinger's hedge, and safety. "Perfect." Starting prematurely, or the slightest delay would upset the delicate timing of his run. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, no last minute chores, conferences, requests, nor instructions. He picked up his pace, as he turned left onto

Stringwell Avenue. He jogged easily along enjoying the sunshine, and the light breeze that dried his brow. Musing on luck, he remembered the words Sam Richardson, passed on to posterity, through Jordan's Father.

"Horse shit, that's what'll bring ya luck." Sam Richardson, a part time worker and full time drunk, had been a childhood hero of the elder Brodum. Some people believe the most unlikely things influence their luck.

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Jordan scarcely noticed the usually dirty and unshaven, always overweight, Lou Garbacia. Though their orbits crossed often enough, they lived in separate universes. Hardly anyone, excepting the horse people, used Old Swamp Road. As a kindness to their horse's hooves, it had been left unpaved. Lou used it the day before, to get to the jungle at the rear of the Millsop's acreage. They had been at him and at him to clear the mess, until it reached the point at which Lou sacrificed a precious Saturday.

After a late start, and sweating away the afternoon, Lou refreshed himself with a few beers before starting for home, a nagging wife, and a multitude of over-active little Garbacia's, or, more likely, the Blue Note.

Old Swamp Road was narrow and difficult to turn around on. Lou, when the beer ran out, sawed his beat up old truck around, backing into the neighboring Aikerman's fence. He did some minor damage. From the cab it didn't look too bad. Lou took off, hoping no one would notice. Lou barely missed the corner Post, but on the side between the Aikermans and the Milsops he cracked the three nearest upright planks at both the upper and lower horizontal supporting timbers.

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Jordan hoped to cover the few blocks, and get to the Blue Note Café before the old bag lady. Often he found change, and occasionally folding currency in the parking lot—if he arrived first. As he rounded the curve, he saw her filling her cart with cans and bottles. As he passed, he nodded to her.

She straightened from her labors and nodded back, smiling her stupid toothless smile. In her left hand she concealed all but a corner of what appeared to be a large denomination bill.

Jordan took this setback in stride. He rationalized, it would be better to save his luck for more important things, like Alamanda Werk. Alamanda exchanged eye contact with Jordan, from the choir loft at church, since she moved into town several weeks ago. This morning, with her husband, Jack, away on business for two weeks, she, in addition, moistened her lips between stanzas with her long sensuous tongue. After services, Alamanda brazenly approached Jordan and his wife, and introduced herself. The information network buzzed with news about Alamanda even before she arrived on the scene, so most of what she had to say was already common knowledge.

Her woeful tales of tribulations with lawn mowers, pool machinery, wasps, nighttime noises, and a water bed programmed for two got no sympathy from Julia, Jordan's wife, though the last particularly, profoundly affected Jordan.

After a mile, or a little better, on Stringwell, Jordan turned left onto the trail that ran along the border of Woodland Park. It started just past Merry Lamb Lane, the address of the Werk residence. After a few hundred yards the trail began to steepen slowly, at first. The most arduous and last pitch before the summit forced Jordan to slow his pace. Jordan took care to make as little noise as possible as he ascended this critical section of trail. From the top Jordan could look down into the Werk's back yard.

At this hour, with good sun, Alamanda usually occupied the only recliner on the deck of the Werk's pool. Jack apparently preferred indoor activities, while Alamanda specialized in extraordinarily diminutive bikinis. Procumbent, she would have the shoestring strap undone and her left gland would be creeping out to catch the sun, denied by cruel propriety. With Jack away, Jordan imagined a more casual approach might prevail.

While Jordan conquered the steepest part, he heard a phone ring in the distance. When he reached the overlook

he beheld below a conspicuously vacant recliner seemingly spot lit by the sun. A small table close by held a neatly folded towel, a nearly full tempting glass dripping with condensation, and hanging casually of the near edge, a translucent bra. Matching bottoms lay sunning themselves on the deck, Along with a pair of sandals.

Through the open slider, Alamanda's sultry voice exclaimed, "Jack, why did you have to call while the sun is at its best?"

Jordan seconded the motion, as he started down the other side of the hill. Next Sunday seemed so far away—and undependable. He wondered, would Joining the choir be too obvious?

Jordan turned left again where the trail ended at Old Swamp Road. The watchful beast guarding the Aikerman estate detected Jordan's approach. The massive animal barked three times. Its deep raw voice rising in volume as tumultuous footfalls racing in his direction indicated to Jordan that the restraining chain, demanded by the neighbors, had not been fastened—again.

Thankful for the sturdy enclosure the Aikermans had insisted upon, over the unanimous objections of the neighbors, Jordan continued his run. He knew the slavering monster would crash into the corner, as it had many times before, expending the full force of its charge upon the stout barrier.

If unchained, the dog treated all who passed democratically. Regulars, like Jordan, it had down to a science. It would lay back and start its final dash, so that it reached the corner just a moment after its quarry passed that point on the outside. As he neared the corner, Jordan heard behind him a mean growl, the pant of anticipation, and claws scratching gravel and gaining fast. Jordan didn't hear the reassuring thump and the angry howls of frustration as the brute launched itself ineffectually against the wooden retainer.

Instead, Jordan sensed something like a miniature tornado gobbling up a pile of sticks, more a feeling than a sound, then the dog drove its fangs through the skin and flesh of his left ankle—to the bone. Its force wrenched Jordan from his path.

He fell in an awkward painful sprawl to the gravel surface of Old Swamp Road, liberally covered with aged and unaged horse manure.