

LORD OF
MISRULE



OTHER BOOKS BY JAIMY GORDON

Circumspections from an Equestrian Statue

The Bend, The Lip, The Kid: Reallife Stories

She Drove Without Stopping

Shamp of the City-Solo

Bogeywoman

LORD OF MISRULE

A NOVEL BY

JAIMY GORDON



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The quotation from *Ainslie's Complete Guide to Thoroughbred Racing*

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This book is for Margie Gordon,
for Bubbles Riley, *still beating that devil*,
and, of course, for Hilry.

Without claiming races there would be no racing at all. Owners would avoid the hazards of fair competition. Instead, they would enter their better animals in races against the sixth- and twelfth-raters that occupy most stalls at most tracks.... This would leave little or no purse money for the owners of cheap horses. The game would perish.

The claiming race changes all that. When he enters his animal in a race for \$5,000 claiming horses, the owner literally puts it up for sale at that price. Any other owner can file a claim before the race and lead the beast away after the running. The original owner collects the horse's share of the purse, if it earned any, but he loses the horse at a fair price.

That is, he loses the horse at a fair price if it is a \$5,000 horse. If it were a \$10,000 horse, in a race for cheaper ones, the owner would get the purse and collect a large bet at odds of perhaps 1 to 10, but the horse would be bought by another barn at less than its true value.

Ainslie's Complete Guide to Thoroughbred Racing

FIRST RACE

Mr Boll Weevil



INSIDE THE BACK GATE of Indian Mound Downs, a hot-walking machine creaked round and round. In the judgment of Medicine Ed, walking a horse himself on the shedrow of Barn Z, the going-nowhere contraption must be the lost soul of this cheap racetrack where he been ended up at. It was stuck there in the gate, so you couldn't get out. It filled up the whole road between a hill of horse manure against the backside fence, stubbled with pale dirty straw like a penitentiary haircut, and a long red puddle in the red dirt, a puddle that was almost a pond. Right down to the sore horses at each point of the silver star, it resembled some woebegone carnival ride, some skeleton of a two-bit ride dreamed up by a dreamer too tired to dream. There'd been no rain all August and by now the fresh worked horses were half lost in the pink cloud of their own shuffling. Red dust from those West Virginia hills rode in their wide open nostrils and stuck to their squeezebox lungs. Red dust, working its devilment, he observed to himself, but he shut his mouth. They were not his horses.

Medicine Ed led his own horse round the corner of the shedrow. What was the name of this animal? If he had heard it, Medicine Ed didn't recall. It was a big red three-year-old, dumb as dirt, that Zeno had vanned up for the fourth race, a maiden without a scratch on him. A van ride on race day did for many a horse, but this boy had rolled out the van as calm as that puddle

yonder, for he felt good and didn't know nothing. True, he had no class. He was the throwaway kind, a heavy-head sprinter who looked like a quarter horse, with a chest like a car radiator. He must not know what was coming, for once he was sore, he might last to age five, with luck.

How long would Medicine Ed last? He had been on the racetrack since he was eight years old. After sixty-four years of this racetrack life he, too, was sore and tired, and like the boll weevil in the song, he was looking for a home. He knew he would always have work, long as he could work. But where was it wrote that he had to rub horses till the day he died? And as for the medicine he could do and which long ago gave him his name, best folks forgot about that, and in these parts so far they had.

Up ahead was Deucey Gifford walking Grizzly, her money-maker. Grizzly was the opposite end of the Mound, a used-up stakes horse, a miler, nerved in his feet, who knew everything. Medicine Ed liked to devil her: Why you don't give that old boy his rest? How old Grizzly be by now? Fourteen? fi'teen?

He's twelve, Deucey said, like she always said, and he don't need no rest. Grizzly knows what comes next for him in this world, after me, I mean. He likes things the way they are.

I bet you done told him, you hard-nose old half-man.

That's right. I told him. He'd rather run.

Medicine Ed laughed a little. I reckon that Grizzly nerved in all four feet, he said. I know he don't feel no pain.

Hell he is. Two's plenty, Deucey snapped. Her watery eyes looked shifty in their pouches, and whether she be lying or not, Medicine Ed couldn't tell. Anyhow Grizzly got heart. He could run without feet, she said.

And which he do, Medicine Ed thought, and he walked on with the red youngster.

Deucey called back to Ed now: You got something in to-night?

Zeno ship up this big three-year-old for the fourth, give him a race.

They went their two ways with their night-and-day cheap horses, and suddenly they were wrassling the two of them like broncs. It had come one of them death squawks from an automobile spring, which you heard when some ignorant individual attempted to bust into the backside of Indian Mound Downs by the back gate. The four horses still on the hot-walking machine taken off, galloping foolishly in the pink cloud round the pole like they did on any excuse. It was a dirt-caked and crumpled white Pontiac Grand Prix, ten years old, longer and lower than it ought to be, resembling a flattened shoe box, with its front bumper hanging down on one side. A girl was driving it, a stranger girl with round blindman sunglasses and two fat brown pigtails sticking out frizzly from her small head. She must have hit that puddle flying since the Grand Prix bounced right out again. Red clay-water squirted on all sides like cream of tomato soup.

The stall man, Suitcase Smithers, stepped out of the racing secretary's shack, brushing doughnut crumbs off the soft bag of guts that pushed out his lime pastel short-sleeve shirt and gray stripe suspenders. He was an unhealthy looking man of a drained cement color, and in that aggravating way he had of never looking straight at nobody, he said past, not into, the open window of the Pontiac: What is your business on this racetrack, miss?

I would like to talk to the stall superintendent, Mr. Vernon Smithers, said the girl. Are you him?

He was him. She said, like they always said, that she worked for a horseman from Charles Town, or coulda been Laurel, or Pocono Downs. He was on the road right now with three,

four, five horses. She come ahead to get the stalls ready.

Suitcase read her the sign that hung over the back gate. RACE-TRACK BUSINESS USE FRONT GATE ONLY.

She stood there. Dusty sweat was gluing her eyebrows together. She wiped across them with the fat part of her hand.

Talk to Archie in the green uniform, said Suitcase, nodding at the faraway gatehouse.

I talked to Archie in the green uniform.

Well, I'm going to tell you the same as what Archie told you. Suitcase cleared his throat. I got no stalls.

Tommy Hansel called ahead! she said, like they always said. Her frizzly dirt-brown pigtails stuck out another inch.

Henry who? Suitcase said. You don't walk in a busy race meeting and say gimme five stalls.

She said on his say-so they give up five stalls in the old place for five stalls in this new place.

Suitcase shrugged. A van don't always show up on time, he explained. Horsemen stay longer than they said. Horses get sick. Everything don't always go exactly on schedule.

The girl stood there. She felt through her jeans pockets front and back and showed Suitcase, down in her palm, a pityfull little roll of bills.

Green as grass, Deucey muttered. Medicine Ed felt her falling in love already.

Suitcase Smithers shook his head but smiled down forgivingly.

Your money ain't long enough to buy five stalls next to each other in this dump, girlie, Deucey commented. First they scatter you all around the place, see what you got. Check it all out while you ain't looking, lessen you got nine eyes.

That's enough now, you damn old newsbag, Suitcase barked,

and the girl jumped. Deucey laughed, so her freckled, saggy breasts barged around in her man's white tank-top undershirt. Suitcase smiled at everybody to show he wasn't really angry. Deucey, why you tryna alarm this young lady? Come in the office, miss. Lemme see what I can find for you.

They stood watching as Suitcase led the girl down the packed clay alley between shedrows.

She'll take anything now, Deucey said.

She look after herself all right, Ed said. Ain't she push her way in the back gate when Archie hang her up at the front?

Doing it all for some handsome deadbeat horseman who works her to death while he rolls high. I seen a million like her, Deucey said.

Ain't you the hard-shell. Tomorrow you be nursering and petting her your own self, said Ed.

Medicine Ed left Zeno's three-year-old in the stall, then looked back at him again from the Winnebago, for the door of the trailer was hanging wide open and this raised the question why Zeno would hang around to bring the animal to the post himself if the red horse was as no count as he appeared to be, and which Zeno said he was. And for that matter why had Zeno drove the van up himself, the van with just the one horse in it?

Medicine Ed was on the watch, for Medicine Ed, like the boll weevil in the song, was looking for a home. He had seen the clabbered cobwebs hanging down in the roof joints, though fall was far from here. He had seen a sparrow with blood red wings. It was taking a dust bath, and when Medicine Ed walked by with a horse, the sparrow looked up and asked him a question, in a language he could almost understand. They were signs that the thread that held it all together was rotting, letting loose and fall-

ing apart. He had a funny, goofered feeling about the way things was going, although Zeno treated him well.

Medicine Ed would be seventy-three on Labor Day. Since he give up drinking he never even had a cold no more. Breathing that pine tar and horse manure all the day was a kind of devil tonic. On account of his froze-up left leg, the result of being run over by a big mare named High Soprano at Agua Caliente in 1958, he had to lie down in the straw on one hip, like a ho posing for a nasty picture, when he worked on a horse's feet. He had to lie on his good side and stick his bad leg straight out. But there wasn't anything a groom or either a trainer did, that Medicine Ed could not still do. And Zeno, for all he was chubbyfat and getting fatter, was a horseman of the old school, a gentleman who never forgot to dip down and stake you when he win. He was more ashamed to be stingy than to be broke, so as long as he had two dollars you had one, whereas a lot of them anymore so tight they scream, they so tight.

Best of all, Zeno left Medicine Ed to run this little side operation here at Indian Mounds by himself. He trusted Ed to medicate, as right he should. Behind a loosened wall plate in the crumpled end of the trailer, Medicine Ed kept Zeno's doctor bag of ampules and syringes. The blue ampule was bute. If you missed the vein with it, the horse would have a goiter hanging off his neck for three days and he was a scratch. The red ampule was ACTH—Medicine Ed could have easily read those letters, if that's what was wrote there, but instead a name as long as your arm wrapped round the little bottle. It was some kind of tropical harmony, for all hormones, he had learned, have to do with the lost harmony. Electrolytes came in a little blue and silver sac like a lunch bag of potato chips. The aspirin pills were loose in the bottom of the bag, white and as big around as a quarter. Oral

bute was white too, but longer and squared off at the ends, like little rowboats, or coffins. Bucha leaves brought forth piss. The asthmador mix, smoldered under a horse's nose, drew long glistening ropes of mucus from his sinuses. But butazolidin was the fast luck oil round here, *bute*, the horseman's Vitamin B.

Generally, Medicine Ed carried a horse to the post and saddled it himself. Zeno stayed at Charles Town, sent somebody over with a couple horses every week or so when he saw spots for them, and vanned the used ones away. Zeno kept just the four stalls at the Mound, one for a tack room near solid with bales of hay and straw from the cobwebby rafters down to the dirt floor. At many a cheap track or at the fairs in the old days, Medicine Ed would have found himself propping two bent old lawn chairs together in the tack room to sleep on, but Zeno had got him leave to haul in that half-caved-in Winnebago which a tree fell over on it oncet, when it was still in the trailer park in Charles Town, and which by far wasn't the worst place Medicine Ed ever laid his head. He could look out the window from his bunk in the afternoon and see all three of his horses nosing hay round their stalls. The toilet wasn't hooked up, and nobody who had right judgment would open the shower curtain and look in, but two burners on the propane stove worked, and behind was a tidy cabinet in which Medicine Ed kept his soups and powders and other ingredients and preparations.

He turned on its head a can of cream of mushroom in a pan, propped his stiff leg on the bunk and stared at the slimy silo of soup while it melted. Zeno's fat back was hunched over the pink-and-black tic tac toe counter of the dinette. Zeno huffed and puffed like he never stopped doing, and meanwhile he was crushing a glowing white pebble into a fine powder with the back of a kitchen knife. When he got that all up in his nose, he

turned to Medicine Ed and instructed him in his cooking.

You oughta put some food in that food, he panted, some milk or vegetables or sumpm. I never see you eat nothing but that mung which housewives use it to mix with sumpm else. You ain't eighteen no more, Ed. Gotta think about them bones.

My friend the late Charles Philpott, Medicine Ed said slowly. You remember Charles?

Sure I remember. Used to work for the Ogdens. Rubbed Equinox when he won the Preakness. I forget how he ended up at the Mound.

Charles Philpott was eighty-five years of age when they carried him out that gate.

I thought the gaffer was a hundred and twenty, much as he claimed to know, said Zeno, popping open a cream soda. Where'd they bury him anyhow?

Carried him in a box on the train to South Carolina. His people wanted him back after all them years.

Maybe he sent em money regular, said Zeno.

Medicine Ed was silent, except for the spoon clinking around the pan.

Say, Ed! Zeno said. You see a funny-looking couple from Charles Town ship in here today? Looking to steal a race or two with four horses. Tommy Hansel. Eyes like a royal nut case. Decent horseman, though. I smoked weed with them a few times. Girl with hair out to here? You give em a hand if they need it. If I know him, Suitcase stiff's em.

Medicine Ed considered the thing. He hadn't taken to that frizzly hair girl. But Zeno moved right on. So what about Charlie Philpott? What was his secret, cause I gotta go look at a horse. What did he eat? I know you ain't gonna tell me mushroom soup.

Charles never ate much of nothing. He had that little check

from the Social Security every month, and I mean little. First thing he do, he take and buy him three cartons of Camel cigarettes. He smoked those Camels till he died.

Zeno laughed, stopping on his way out the doorway. So what did kill Charlie Philpott? One of his bets came in? He used to have no luck at all, except for knowing the Ogdens.

I don't know, maybe you right. Track finery let him have one of them new rooms over the kitchen. On the Ogdens' say-so. Tryna do right by him after thirty years. First night in there, he keeled over . . .

But Zeno was gone—his pickup truck just a spurt of gravel, cloud of red dust. That was Zeno, excited, wheezing, out of breath, whistles leaking out his nose that ought not to be there, probably from sniffing that stuff. Fat Zeno busting through doors, squeezing into payphones, running around, dealing off this one, lining up that one. No rest and a little fatter every week, you could see it sticking to him. And now he was off again, without telling Medicine Ed whether he shouldn't ought to ride ten dollars on that big red maiden in the fourth. Zeno had left his *Telegraph* on the counter and Medicine Ed opened to INDIAN MOUND DOWNS, FRIDAY, AUGUST 21, 1970, counted down four races and tried to make something out.

He didn't try to read all the words in the chart, or the horses' names. Time was short and that was beyond his learning. Z-e-n-o he found readily enough. Over on the owner's side, to his surprise, he saw the same thing again, **Own.—Zeno G II**. Then he looked at the numbers. Numbers he could read as good as Einstein. The thing that struck him right away about Zeno's three-year-old was the fewness of the numbers. For some reason they had shut the fellow down after two races as a two-year-old. He was somebody's big red secret, for the horse had hardly run.