

# **The Palio**



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Remi rode bikes in his sleep.

The old man stared out the stone window and dreamt of riding down the great hill and back up again. Past the olive branches that brushed his arms, through the perfect rows of grapes. He hadn't been on a bike in years, but still he felt the motion in his legs, the strain in his calves, the burn in his thighs. Since the injury a good day was one without pain when he could stand looking out high above the orchard.

Today he didn't worry about his legs or the pain, but his wife's birthday, now only weeks away. She told him she wanted nothing, especially this time of year.

"The grapes are so full," she'd say.

But he wanted to do something, knowing what she had done for him 20 years before.

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Twenty years ago:

The wooden shades on his window shook in small tremors, waking Remi. He looked over and saw his wife was really gone, only a note on her pillow. The pain ran up and down his leg, from his heel to hip, shooting one way and then another. He reached for his crutches and with great dexterity aimed the

rubber nub for the window latch, catching a towel, a glass, a hand full of painkillers and a bottle full of water in the process. And then with a heroic lean he knocked off the latch and the early day sun roared in.

A buzz and then the door to his room peaked open. Remi turned quickly, the pain racing violently through his body was subdued by a vision and a voice.

"Scuzzi, scuzzi, I thought you gone," said a woman who in his early morning confusion looked angelic. "I think everyone gone."

"It's okay," he said, "I'm not going anywhere."

She was striking with perfect breasts, almost too large for her small frame. A halo of blonde hair and an accent somewhere between British and Italian.

"You no good?" she asked, setting down her pail, duster and other supplies.

"I hurt my leg," he said, reaching for the note on his wife's pillow. "Back at 6, be in touch, xoxo"

"How?" she asked.

"Riding," he said.

Looking past him into the daylight she approached the bed, "ah, the Palio," she said, her face brightening as she came closer to the light, now splashing the room with yellow.

"Palio?" he asked.

"Si, si," she said reaching for him.

And with that she leveraged her little body and pulled his arm, lifting his entire frame in one perfectly maneuvered tug.

"Wow," he said, surprised at her strength to pull his 215 pound frame.

"I was nurse," she said.

Exploding below him was a sea of 50,000 Italians pouring into the town square. The bricks and stones that make up the huge piazza now covered in layers of light brown sand that reminded Remi of brown sugar. Banners and flags of every color jumped and screamed from the huge mosaic of humanity.

"Today is most speciale' day," she said.

As she went about her cleaning Remi researched the excitement, watching the young woman tidy the room.

"Which district is yours?" he shouted to her as she cleaned the bathroom, now understanding the horses from the town's 17 districts race with jockeys on bareback for a year's worth of pride.

"We Torre'," she told him. "No bull. That funny in American? Yes?"

Remi laughed at the joke he did not get and the seriousness at which she took the race. It reminded him of Civil War nuts who reenact great battles.

But his view on it turned from a side show to a central theme when the hotel concierge explained:

"If your horse will not win then you wish pain on the horse of your enemy," he said with the seriousness of a medical condition.

Lotty, the ex nurse, current housekeeper, found a wheelchair in the hotel basement and promised him a closer view when her shift ended.

At 4:30 she pushed him out the back exit of the hotel and wheeled him amidst a crowd waving black and red placards with the word Torre' scrawled over a picture of a bull.

He'd forgotten about excitement, anticipation.

"Boredom" he'd drawl if you asked why he came to Siena. If you asked everyone else, they'd say it was for his birthday party.

Had he known what his wife was planning he would have killed the idea in the first trimester. He was in no mood.

The planning started almost a year earlier-- just days after the software company moved most of his job and half his salary to India. Just before his only child went off to college. He was secretly dreading the milestone and hoping the day would pass without notice. Like a leap year it would just not be on the calendar.

He did not fear what it meant to him, but what it represented to others.

It was supposed to symbolize mid-life. Sitting conspicuously 20 years past his wedding and 20 years until his 70th, the age at which his father passed. He did not discuss it, not with the other men he sat with at the coffee shop from morning until midday. The mix of entrepreneurs who'd made it big and men who'd lost their jobs. The dreamers in their 20's who were looking for the next Facebook and the yoga mommies who came in sweaty talking with fascination of the new cup holder on their \$500 stroller.

There were days he just sat listening to the world around him, ideas bouncing off the young brains, banalities off the lips of the old, the same well-worn jokes in the ears of the middle-agers. All these people with nowhere to go. And him, watching it all as if he weren't a part of it.

And so as the birthday approached he wondered: The middle of what? His life, his marriage, his daughter's existence? No. He was on the periphery of all these, in the middle of nothing.

But his wife didn't know, wouldn't listen even if he decided to tell her, to talk about it. Life moved on, the hours passed whether he was sitting at his desk or the coffee shop or on his bike.

"Just because you are taking a pause, the clocks still strike," Debbie told him as he returned home from dollar beer night with the young guys he'd met at coffee.

She planned the bike trip, his 6 favorite people and their spouses in Italy. But as he walked through the gates of Siena the surprise brought only embarrassment.

He'd stopped biking since the layoff, though Debbie hadn't noticed. The group, who called themselves the Peleton, talked about work as they gasped for air between hills. These were men after all, no discussion of what it felt like to be riding down the backside of the big hill. No one brought up the fears of a house without children, a day without work, the lifespan of their savings' account. They talked about work and so when he couldn't contribute to that discussion, he stopped contributing on the bike.

On the first day through Chianti country he was surprised by the difficulty of the ride. Was it him and his aging body, or were these hills higher than the Midwestern rolling bumps he'd come across? Maybe it was the previous night's wine. There was a nagging in his leg that morning. By lunch it was a pain and as they scaled the final hill he heard a click and snap, but assumed it was noise from the bike, a knock from the wind as the fire burned up his leg.

"You guys keep going," he said as his ride came to a glide until the bus returned him to his room overlooking the Piazza del Campo, in the center of the small city. "It'll just be a day or so and I'll be back," he told his wife, before sneaking another hand full of Advil.

But now his heart beat with 50,000 others. But it beat for her as she looked back at him and laughed, and so did he.

"We must be victory," she said. "Ten place."

"First place," Remi said.

"First ten," she explained.

Although Remi knew the first 10 horses made it to the final run he let Lotty try to explain how the previous year their 11th place finish tortured the town. The jockey and his family were banished to Pisa, where he now sells frozen ice to tourists.

The energy in the campo built toward the start. Remi could feel it in his chair as the mostly worn rubber tires clicked and clacked on the hard stone. Lotty held on with her left hand, a fist and flag in her right.

Everything shook as the horses lined up, stamping and neighing, jumping on their hind legs untamed. The horse with the bull symbol looked strong, but there was something in the eyes of the jockey that gave Remi concern. It was fear. Remi knew that look, the fear of disappointing the ones who counted on you.

"He is beautiful, no?" Lotty shouted, of the horse he assumed, or maybe the jockey, pointing in the direction of the large black stallion gleaming with sweat and water, hosed down by a master of ceremonies who strode atop a stage, cooling the backs of the beasts.

Sand rose up like a storm, spraying the spectators, most of whom covered their eyes with their team-colored hankies, until things settled. Remi was caked in, it would be days before he would pick the final grains of sand from the curves of his ears.

His only memory of the first race was the sound of Lotty's voice, the piercing shriek as the race began, a sustained roar as the tears washed out the sand. Her final sound, a moan, a sound that made his heart race, a sound of passion and relief.

"Nueve, Nueve," she yelled, jumping up and up, never down, slapping her hand on his shoulder, jerking his leg in and out of the stirrup, driving his pain deeper, but also suppressing it. The feeling of her hand was electric, the joy of her joy, brought relief.

The crowd grew quiet, Remi couldn't see why, but he knew something was wrong. His only view was the behinds of the people, kids holding onto their parents as they stood on his wheelchair armrests. The horse was there, but the jockey was gone, tossed into the crowd before the horse crossed the finish. There were screaming exchanges in fast Italian, different than the usual screaming fast Italian. This had a particular cadence, not a single word was a legible to him.

Remi looked up and could see tears in a man's eyes, the children were weeping, pounding their fists into their parent's thighs. A large man shut out the sun as Lotty lay her forehead on Remi's shoulder. The man had a gray mustache, wisps of black that met his cheeks and stretched well beyond his face. Remi could not discern, tears of joy?

An exchange of angry Italian exploded between Lotty and the man she called Il Mayore'.

"Si, si, si" she screamed at him before turning to Remi.

"You are jockey, no?" she asked.

"Jockey?"

"You ride horse, yes?"

"No, no," he said, "I ride bike."

"You are good?"

"Yes," he said shaking his head up and down, embarrassed and afraid to disappoint. "I can ride..."

"It same thing, no?" she said convincingly.

"No, not same thing," Remi said.

The last time he'd ridden a horse it was with stirrups and a saddle at a dude ranch in Colorado. The horse's name was Muffin. This was breakneck speed around something that wasn't even a track, but a sandlot.

The mayor smiled, nodded his head once and then reached down and with great fanfare, as if he'd plucked the perfect tomato from the garden, grabbed Remi's arm, and with far less dexterity than Lotty, yanked him up onto his bad foot, the square was upside down, the mayor's hands firmly wrapped around Remi's calfs, his head dangling over his shoulder like a rag doll.

A section of the crowd yelled with delight as he was hoisted onto Del Frisco, a 500-pound horse that would easily crush him. Ninety percent of the crowd booed the pale American who they did not recognize. Thousands hating him almost as much as he hated himself at that moment.

"Gratzi," Lotty screamed, "Gratzi mio," fear and regret firing through his brain, but her smile made him smile, through the emotion.

When the next words left his mouth he knew he was gone, into that moment like none before. He would be a jockey carrying the hopes of a village in a 400 year-old tradition. There was a section of this nameless crowd that loved him, prayed for him, hoped for his victory, in a way he hadn't felt since childhood. This moment in the blazing July heat in the midst of a crowd who did not know his name, but cheered for what he represented. Their hope. This moment connected him to his home 5,000 miles away, a place he would never see again. But in his memory was the suburban life he was escaping, even at that moment. He could recall that life of a teenager, even as he entered the ring. His body was in Siena, but his mind on that soccer field 35 years before, when the 9<sup>th</sup> grade finals went to penalty kicks.

After a missed opportunity by the Potomac Giants it was his chance to make the save and carry the game forward. He carefully watched the hips of his opponent, an old goalie trick his coach taught him, as he approached the ball. He knew half the people watching hated him and hoped for his poor choice, but half of those crowding the field that day prayed for him in a way he hadn't forgotten in the intervening years. He saw it in their faces as the young boy approached the ball. Remi leapt to his left, the direction of the underdeveloped hips of his opponent. The excitement of the moment launched him toward the metal goal post and the unsuspecting pin protruding from the side pierced his scalp. He saw the blood and it made him nauseous, red flowing down his face, past his left eye, off his cheek and onto his white shorts. This was all before the opponent stutter-stepped and quietly kicked the ball to the other side of the net.

No one ran to help him, his hair now thick with blood, in his 14 year-old memory, until the coach threw a towel his way and remarked, "you jumped early."

But here in Siena on a bigger stage, the stakes were no higher, but the sense of opportunity in his soul was the same.

"For you," he shouted, "For you," as Lotty waved the flag of the team that was hers and now his.

It hurt his thighs when his legs spread around the horse's massive mid-section. The stallion jumped back and wailed as Remi was tossed about. And they were off, without warning, shattering the tumult and bringing it to a higher call.

Remi grabbed the mane with his right hand and left, his body jerking back as if in a dental chair and then forward and back. The power was more than he expected, horse's hair coming out by the handful as he reached down for more, then more. No matter how he pulled or how he tried to slow the horse it was in an all-out sprint, galloping over the rocks and sand, the pebbles of time that lay in their place after being kicked by another horse at another festival on another July the second.

By the third turn Remi could better maneuver himself, not quite controlling the horse, but the illusion of knowing what the kicks and slides meant. As if in slow motion he caught Lotty's glance as he headed down the stretch, four horses all together in a row so none could pass. He was last of the four, but like the far side of a car bumper he couldn't see the noses to know who was really in the lead.

All he knew was what Lotty had told him when she rolled him into the arena, that if her team did not win, La Lizarde' must lose.

"They no can win," she said, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "That is cata-strophe" as if it were two words.

He glanced down at the red and white colors of the horse next to him, the glare of the black mustachioed rider baring down, white saliva coming from his mouth and the horse's. Remi could catch that horse he thought, but not the other two. Would causing their defeat be victory enough for him? For Lotty? For the people of the district?

As the final strides were taken Remi leaned up on his horse, his bandaged left leg grazing its side. His left hand untangled from the mane reaching low to grab the clip that held his bandage in place. He jabbed his left foot, the spikes of the clip penetrating into the horse's side drawing blood, but giving him leverage to rise up on the stallion. Remi and the horse both shrieked in pain in a burst of power that carried them both across the line, dashing the dreams of generations of Italians, but making one small group very happy.

Remi belonged once again. Not to a job or a group of bikers or even a family, but to a district of people who celebrated his accomplishments and were not afraid to show it.

A human wall stopped the horse and crowded around the winner pinching his leg between the people and the wound, but he felt no pain. The Mayor and fellow district-men heaved Lotty onto the horse, her arms tightly wrapped around Remi's mid-section when she kissed him. To roars and jeers they strode across the ancient rocks, parting the sea of people and into a new life.

The sun now well into its descent brought sharp rays of light into the eyes of those looking up at the Grand Hotel window where Remi and Lotty first met only hours before. But if they looked closely they could see a woman, hair matted by sweat and sun tan lotion, standing over her neatly made bed wondering about all the noise in the square and knowing she would never see her husband again.



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