

The Testimony

That Marvin Watson, Sr. had been dead these twenty years mattered not at all. Marvin Watson, Jr., age fifty-eight, had always been, and would always be, known as Li'l Marv.

Standing before the hundred or so hopeful, gathered under the tent for Brother Emmett Beatrous' healing, Li'l Marv's voice trembled in cadence with his arms: Healed of the cancer I was, by Brother Emmett here and the grace of my Lord and Savior." And as far as Li'l Marv was able to know, what he said was certainly so. Dressed as simply as he spoke, Li'l Marv, the assembled knew beyond doubt, was one of them. Li'l Marv did not request, nor did he receive, any pay for such performances. Every year when Brother Emmett's revival rolled into St. Tammany Parish, the preacher could count on Li'l Marv's testimony.

Four generations of Watson men had subsisted by training and racing thoroughbreds on the Louisiana circuit. Each generation had progressed modestly and Li'l Marv counted his son's bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University, a first for the family, as evidence of his own contribution to the Watson ascendancy. He never left home without his L.S.U. hat on and his truck was festooned with countless bumper stickers celebrating the school's athletic achievements. Li'l Marv was content that he would be the last of the horse-training Watsons.

The doctors, they give up on me, sent me home with my clothes hangin' on me like a scarecrow. Lost my daddy to the prostate cancer and I was on my way to join him with the cancer through my stomach when I come upon Brother Emmett here," his voice began to rise. Then Brother Emmett laid his hands on me and with the faith he give me, that illness went plumb away, I tell you, it went plumb away." The interest of the audience had been captured and they leaned forward in unison. And that's been five years, hallelujah. A man and amen!" A standing ovation ensued as Li'l Marv danced a two step around the makeshift stage that held himself, Brother Emmett, and a musical quartet. The organist rolled a few vibrant riffs and at his nod the drummer struck his cymbals with conviction.

Brother Emmett's dark, angular features housed a Dickensian nose and chin that seemed destined to meet. At his bidding, the altar call proceeded with hands laid on and a verbal blessing dispatched to each believer. Li'l Marv and the cymbalist stationed themselves at the back of the tent with collection baskets in anticipation of Brother Emmett's dismissal. No miracles

were evident as the hopeful shuffled out surrendering coins and a few dollar bills to Brother Emmett's agents.

Li'l Marv had never forgotten that pain or its sudden disappearance. For weeks he had waited for its return and now for years had celebrated its absence. Unfortunately for Brother Emmett, his other healing successes were limited to headaches and minor arthritis relief. His goal of a television ministry was distant and the love offerings collected at the conclusion of his healings only slightly exceeded his expenses. What with the tent rental, musicians, and travel," he had muttered to Li'l Marv, "The Lord ain't doin' his part to launch this ministry."

Look here, Brother Emmett. It's like this. The Lord'll do what the Lord'll do. Why you done taught me as much." Li'l Marv's non-denominated Christian faith was a whole lot deeper than that of his healer. No one had been more surprised at the apparent disappearance of Li'l Marv's cancer than Brother Emmett. Unable to duplicate that success, he viewed his touring revival as no more than another gig in his long resume of county fair games of chance, burial insurance, and home siding sales, each of which were practiced under a different persona. Hopwood Hastings was the carny, Oscar Thurgood dealt with final arrangements, and Ernest Polk was the tin man. At age seventy, the performances required no rehearsals.

Since Li'l Marv knew only Brother Emmett and had experienced his power first hand, he had a special request that evening. A good friend, unable to attend that evening's service, was in need of healing. Would Brother Emmett take a short ride with Li'l Marv for a laying on of hands and some praying? He would.

The Watson pick-up truck bounced and lurched suddenly upon leaving the paved state highway and entering the gravel-filled potholes of the Old Hickory Thoroughbred Training Center.

Whatta we doin here, Marv?"

Goin' to see George, Brother Emmett. George's needin' your help."

Incredible George occupied one of Li'l Marv's five stalls at the training center. At three, the now eight-year-old gelding, was the best Louisiana-bred running and had finished third to the eventual Kentucky Derby winner in that year's Louisiana Derby. Since his modest pedigree and neutered status limited his use to athletic performance, his weary physique was now battling \$10,000 claimers for modest paydays. But those paydays had

sustained the Watson Stable until lameness put George on the shelf going on two weeks now.

Brother Emm, I need for you to lay them hands on old George. We got to get him back to the races....soon. Ole Doc Garrity says he got the nervicular disease. Doc says 'bout all we can do is bute him and pray."

Never done a whole lot with animals, Marv, to be honest. Laid my hands on an old heifer once. That's about it."

The preacher was resigned to going through the motions for Li'l Marv's benefit if not Incredible George's. As he intoned his stock prayer of cure with both knees bent, Brother Emmett grasped the snoozing gelding's right front ankle with both hands as he tightly closed his own eyes. A few seconds later, rising unsteadily and brushing the shavings from his knees, he spoke to Li'l Marv whose head was still bowed with eyes closed.

Don't have to tell you it's all up to the Lord. If he wills it, Ole George here might get hisself sound, if he don't-he won't."

With that it was back to the tent where Brother Emmett's associates were already replacing prayer cards in the folding chairs for the next evening's closing service. Brother Emmett quickly took his leave with a cursory God bless you, Li'l Marv," and the trainer was back in his mobile home to catch a few hours of sleep before 4:30 a.m. feeding time. By 6:30 the following morning, Marv was haltering George for another hopeful turn of walking the shed row. The hope was for a sound display of stride which he had not seen in several weeks. Liam Garrity was making his morning rounds when Marv led George from his stall.

Just getting him out Doc, take a look," said Marv as he smooched to the nickering gelding. Lemme know if he looks any better, Doc. Sure need to get him back to the races."

After a few uncertain steps, George shook his head and began pulling Marv around the shed row with the verve the trainer had not felt since both of their younger days.

He don't feel off a bit, Doc. How's he look?"

The vet was silent but nodded with approval as he studied George's gait.

Would you have buted him this morning, Marv?" He asked with that subjunctive tense that obviated his Irishness.

Ain't had nothin' but prayers and rubbin' for the last three days, like you told me, Doc."

Mother of God, Marv, he's strutting like a rooster! The Hail Marys work a damn sight better than me vet's bag, I must say. You just as well run the old horse, I doubt the time off has hurt his fitness a bit."

Visions of a betting coup danced through Li'l Marv's limited imagination. George had been out of the money in his last two starts at the \$10,000 claiming level as his malady had progressively impaired his performance. His absence from training was common knowledge at the training center, which meant that it was equally so at Evangeline Downs where he competed. Marv reckoned that a drop to \$5000 would signal a loss of confidence, given George's problems, and scare off both trainers who might claim him as well as the players who might back him in the betting pool. He pulled a tattered condition book from a back pocket of his loosely hung Wrangler jeans and thumbed through the dog-eared pages holding possible races for George.

Here's one with George's name on it Doc. Colts and geldings, four and up, going long for a \$5000 tag on the Fourth of July."

Put him in lad, he'll canter in... especially if I say my beads," answered the vet. I might even have a small wager myself with half the winnings for the poor box of course. The old man taught me that one, Marv."

Li'l Marv Watson and Liam Garrity were not the only ones eyeing the race. A small band of conspirators, knowing that the Fourth of July always produced a large crowd of unwary bettors was scouring that day's races for what horsemen like to call humbug. One fixed race could insure a profitable meeting for Woodrow Barth and his cronies.

Barth rocked on the hind legs of his folding chair and lit a cigarette. This he did directly below the No Smoking sign outside the tent housing his make-shift Wild Woodie's Fireworks Stand across from the track. He made a large yellow circle around George's race with a felt tip pen and showed the page to Emile Gautreau, leader of the cabal of Cajun riders in the jock's room at Evangeline Downs.

Looks like as good a spot as we'll find, eh Goat?" Gautreau studied the conditions and nodded in agreement.

We'll see what we can do after the entries, Mister Woodie."

When the entries were drawn, Gautreau was named to ride the likely favorite in the seven horse field. One down... six to go. He headed for the fireworks stand with the overnight sheet of entries. Mister Woody, we got all of them covered except for that George horse. Watson's riding that Mexican bug boy that don't speak English or French. He don't get many mounts, mostly gallops horses in the morning."

Incredible George? I know that horse. Lots of back class but dead lame. Been in the barn out at Old Hickory for more than a week. Can't even get him to the track. They gotta be hoping he gets taken. "

Okay Boss, then it's a go. Looks to me like that three horse, Coco's Baby, has a big chance," he answered with a grin displayed through a frontal dental gap. Gautreau, battling riding weight and middle age, still won his share of honestly contested races. But the pre-ordained result, though called upon infrequently, provided a welcomed financial cushion at a level of the profession that provided little luxury. Emile Gautreau would choreograph to insure Coco's Baby would win. It would fall to Woodrow Barth to bet into the pool as much money as possible without causing the attention of the wagering public or the stewards.

The assortment of bayou-land insects being zapped on the lights surrounding the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile dirt track at Evangeline Downs caused no distractions to the horses being led from the backside to the paddock for the sixth race that July 4 evening. Sweat gushed from every gland on Li'l Marv's body as he waddled forth from the barn with Incredible George in hand. The line of competitors shuffled stoically with heads slung low in vain search for a breath of cooler air. The habitués conversed alternatively in what passed for English in South Louisiana and the more familiar Cajun patois.

Woodrow Barth had two of his colleagues scattered strategically apart from him in remote corners of the track. Slowly, methodically they purchased win tickets on Coco's Baby in \$20 increments always wary of the flashing odds on the board where that horse's price fluctuated innocently reaching no higher than 6/1 and no lower than 7/2. Incredible George's odds rose slightly to 10/1 from the program price of 8/1. Few in the holiday crowd of occasional racing fans even knew of George's youthful successes, and those that did were rightfully put off by his descent to the bottom of the claiming ranks.

Li'l Marv glanced only once at the odds board from the paddock as he readied the gelding's tack for the race. He reached into his jeans to verify the presence of the three now-soaked hundred dollar bills he had brought

with which to back George. Manuel Lopez waited in the jock's room, listening to music on his earphones, oblivious to the plan being plotted by Emile Gautreau and Company.

The conspiracy was uncomplicated. Coco's Baby would break just behind the leader in his typical fashion. He would save ground, closest to the rail, and all would insure that he had an unobstructed path into the stretch. Gautreau would take a hard hold of the favorite out of the gate and stay wide throughout the race. To clear the one path, the rider on the horse breaking from post 2 would cut off Incredible George, leaving a clear run for Coco's Baby to the rail.

At the ring of the bell, the riders filed out of the jockey's room to their designated stalls for instructions from the trainers of their mounts. George's jockey bounded toward Li'l Marv who leaned against the wall of stall number one. The apprentice approached his only call of the evening with youthful vigor, slapping his whip against his palm. His competitors shuffled to their assigned posts with the enthusiasm of reporting shift workers.

With no common language between them, Marv and Manuel exchanged smiles and handshakes. Marv tightened the fittings of Manuel's saddle around George's girth, and whispered "Good Georgie, good boy" as he pulled the over girth across the top of the saddle and stretched it under his belly to the buckle in the hands of the valet on the other side of the gelding. George threw his head as Marv cinched it tightly. Rubbing his hands together with confidence, he looked into Manuel's bright eyes. With arms outstretched and palms down, the trainer rapidly flexed and relaxed his fingers in the universal sign language of the track: go to the lead immediately and hopefully stay there. "Mucho rapido," attempted Marv. "Si, yes," answered Manuel with a confident nod and a pop of his whip to his palm.

Coco's Baby was now 4/1 and Woodrow Barth's stake was approaching \$10,000. George's odds stood still at 10/1. At the call of riders up, Marv gave Manuel a leg up, and George led the procession of competitors to the track. Manuel placed his whip between his teeth, reaching down with his right hand to check the tightness of his girth. As he leaned forward, he smiled at Marv, signaled a thumb-up with his left hand and between clenched teeth spoke quietly:

"Buena suerte, boss, Buena suerte."

For the first time, Marv managed a smile himself confident that he had connected with his rider. As George strode toward the track, he began a

prance that Li'l Marv had not seen since the gelding's three-year-old days of glory. He pulled the matted fold of hundreds from his pocket and headed for the betting window.

The other riders completed the post parade and warmed up their mounts in their accustomed routine. The large betting pool accommodated Woodrow Barth's intentions well and he easily reached his \$10,000 budget without disruption. Li'l Marv's bet briefly dropped George's odds to 8/1 but by post time, the one horse was 11/1.

The race was notably lacking in suspense. The announcer cried the traditional "Ils sont parti!" as the horses broke from the gate. George seized the lead with such gusto that there was no opportunity to impede his path. Manuel took a hold and the old horse settled into a relaxed gait that quickly opened a rock's throw between him and Coco's Baby. The further they went, the bigger the margin became. With Manuel now a mere passenger, George accelerated into the far turn with a five-length lead that diminished only slightly by the finish because the rider was easing George up.

The losing riders displayed no emotion as they dismounted upon returning to the finish line. Not so Manuel Lopez who shook his fist in the air as he greeted Li'l Marv.

Marv slapped palms with Manuel and posed with him and George for the winning photo.

Woodrow Barth fanned his deck of losing tickets with his thumb before tossing them to the ground and beating a path of depression to the parking lot. He headed immediately to the fireworks stand to relieve his hired replacement. The entire inventory of fireworks remaining would not make a dent in the evening's disaster of the track no matter how much he sold. As the evening wore on, the traffic at the stand had now reduced to a trickle. Woodrow stood alone outside the tent drawing on his cigarette and trying to summon the energy to dismantle his stand.

An old truck pulling an even older horse trailer approached the stand with Li'l Marv at the wheel. Marv had noticed his trailer lights were out and figured the connection to the truck had come loose. The shoulder in front of the fireworks stand would provide a convenient place to remedy his problem. When Barth recognized the truck as that of Watson he immediately ground his smoke into the ground and began moving to the slowing vehicles. Li'l Marv was about the last person he wanted to see but the confrontation was unavoidable.

How 'bout it, Marv. Y'all ok there?"

Why Brother Emmett, you pretty much the lastest face I'd expect to see here. Got your friend, Incredible George, ridin' back there. You ain't gonna believe it, but he just won a race over there. Paid \$24 too. Don't know if it was just you or them Catholic prayers from the Doc, but the old horse run big tonight."

Marv drew a roll of hundreds from his jeans, counted out five of them and thrust them into the preacher's hands.

I know you don't bet but sure want your ministry to share in the profits, yessir."

Much appreciated, son," the preacher answered through a forced smile.

I know them folks back home might not think much of healing horses, but you give me a call anytime, Brother Emmett. I'll give you a testimony anytime."

That's mighty good of you, Marv, I just might do that. Just might."

God bless you, Brother Emm."

Yup, God bless you too, Li'l Marv."

Marv reconnected his trailer lights and headed east to St. Tammany Parish. The preacher began packing up the remaining fireworks inventory juggling in his mind which character would be the source of his next payday.