

## AT TIMES IN FLIGHT

### A Parable

HENRY ROTH

I WAS courting a young woman, if the kind of brusque, uncertain, equivocal attentions I paid her might be called courting: it was for me at any rate, never having done it before.

I had met her at Z, the artists' colony, a place you've probably heard of, where writers, painters, and musicians were invited for the summer, or part of it, in the hope that, relieved of their usual pressures and preoccupations, and provided with abundant leisure, they would create. Unfortunately it didn't work that way, as you've probably also heard. Most of us, it would seem, needed the pressures and preoccupations, since once there, we loafed or spent a great deal of time in frivolity and idle chatter. It was during the time of the Spanish Civil War, in 1938 to be exact, and of course that formed a part of our conversation, the fact that the Loyalists seemed on the verge of victory and yet incapable of gaining it. There was also at that time a kind of projection of the Marxist mood among young intellectuals: a kind of cynicism had entered, worldliness, a kind of sophistication. I mention these things to recall the mood of the time as it seemed to me.

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IN 1934 HENRY ROTH published a novel, *Call It Sleep*, which was acclaimed as an outstanding work by a newcomer. Soon after that, Mr. Roth retired from writing to raise ducks and geese in Augusta, Maine. Since the war, various critics have singled out *Call It Sleep* as a neglected achievement in American Jewish writing. "At Times in Flight" is Mr. Roth's first published story in many years. He writes: "... The main meaning of the story to me lies in the projection, so to speak, of the inadequacy of a man's art in the face of modern realities, and the implied decision to make a new start."

I was then engaged in writing a second novel, which I had agreed to complete for my publisher. I had already written quite a section, and this opening section had been accepted and extolled. It was only necessary for me to finish it, and that was all. But it went badly from then on; in fact, it had gone badly before I reached Z—I can't blame Z for that: they provided me with the necessary environment to write in. It had gone badly—aims had become lost, purpose, momentum lost. A profound change seemed to be taking place within me in the way I viewed my craft, in my objectivity. It is difficult to say. I am, unfortunately, not analytical enough to be capable of isolating the trouble, though I don't know what good that would have done either.

That was the time, the general mood, the predicament—in sketchiest of forms. The young woman I was courting—we shall call her Martha—was a very personable, tall, fair-haired young woman, a pianist and composer, a young woman with a world of patience, practicability, and self-discipline—bred and raised in the best traditions of New England and the Middle West, the most wholesome traditions. I was, of course, at that time, sufficiently advanced and superior to be somewhat disdainful of those traditions. I wondered whether there was any reality to my courtship, any future, whether, in short, anything would come of it. I was so committed to being an artist—in spite of anything.

The summer advanced. I wish I were clever enough to relate some of the clever things that were said and done there or to re-create some of the clever people who sojourned there, or give some notion of the setting, the place in which we lived and spent our time, the semi-cloistral mansion,

the individual cabins for composition, the walks, statuary, the rest. I think many people know about the place and have heard about its former hostess and its various diversions. That will have to do. A few things come to mind: playing charades in the evening in the darkly furnished, richly carpeted, discreetly shadowed main room, the ample servings of food, the complaints of constipation, the missives that were wont to be sent by the hostess to her guests calling attention to some minor infraction of the rules or breach of propriety. Like all such places, I suppose, it had a tendency to become ingrown.

The colony was close to Saratoga Springs, and I owned a Model-A Ford, and in the early morning before breakfast I would drive down from Z to the spa. There was a kind of public place there in those days, a place where paper cups could be bought for a cent, and a sort of fountain where the water bubbled through a slender pipe into a basin, and I say bubbled because that was one of its attractions, the fact that it did bubble.

Ever since childhood I have regarded carbonated water as something of a treat, something not easily obtainable, in fact, only by purchase, remembering the seltzer-water man on the East Side laboring up the many flights of stairs with his dozen siphons in a box. And here it was free, and not only free but salutary. The water had a slightly musty or sulphurous flavor to go with its effervescence, but its properties were surpassingly benign.

I happened to mention to a small group standing in front of the main building of Z the effectiveness and bracing qualities of the waters of the spring, and invited at large anyone who wished to accompany me in the morning. The response was almost universally negative. "Drink that water? That stuff?" was the tenor of their comment. "I'd sooner drink mud-water," said one of the poets. But one person did reply in the affirmative. That was Martha. She liked the water; it shortly became apparent that she liked it as much as I did.

So we were soon driving together in the

morning, from Z to the spa, traversing the mile or so of highway that led past the race track under the morning trees. The racing season was due to begin, and as a kind of added incentive to the ride, we could see the preliminary training of the horses—whether this was on the track itself, or a subsidiary one beside it, I no longer remember. But as we drove past in the early morning, we would see what I suppose was one of the usual sights at race tracks, but to us a novelty: the grooms or trainers bent low over their mounts and urging them on for a longer or shorter gallop. A horse is a beautiful thing. A fleet, running horse, and we would stop sometimes on our way and watch one course along the white railing. Enormously supple and swift, they seemed at times in flight. The dirt beneath their hooves seemed less spurred by their hooves than drawn away beneath them in their magnificent stride.

THE racing season opened. We had neither of us ever been to a horse race, and we decided it might be a worth-while experience to attend one, especially since the track itself was so accessible, and as an additional inducement again, in view of the traditional impecuniousness of artists—free. In other words, the race track adjoined Z at one side, and it was just a matter of a short walk through the woods of the estate before one came to a turn of the track—or so we had been told—and what could be more pleasant to lovers, or quasi-lovers, than a walk through a forest on a pleasant day. We set out in the afternoon.

The path was one not frequently trodden. We more or less sensed its direction, though I think as we approached we could hear a murmur through the woods, and so oriented ourselves. We arrived at a fairly steep embankment which we climbed, and came to a halt before the iron palings of a fence. The track lay before us—at a peculiar angle, one might say, to the normal. We were not in the grandstand or near it, viewing the activities—we were far away from it. In fact, the grandstand with its throng was mostly

a blur of color, in front of it was. It is perhaps not a scene. We seemed were, in some corner behold the excitement most secret way there; I know not the spectacle, not though it were a There was an reached us from playing, the misoff animation at tance communic

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a blur of color, and the horses being paraded in front of it were tiny and remote figures. It is perhaps memory that diminishes the scene. We seemed to be, as we virtually were, in some coign or niche where we could behold the excitement in a remote and almost secret way. I can't recall what we said there; I know we were both enchanted by the spectacle, miniature though it was, as though it were a race track in an Easter egg. There was an undercurrent of sound that reached us from the grandstand, the band playing, the mingled voices, a certain far-off animation and stir that even at this distance communicated itself.

The horses cavorted, shied, sidled restively as they were brought to the post. The crowd hushed immediately, and the bugle sounded insistent and clear, and suddenly the race began.

THE pack headed in a direction away from us toward the opposite curve of the track, and if anything, they were tinier than before, toy horses, toy riders, far off and almost leisurely with distance. Then they rounded the far curve and came toward us, and now they appeared to gain in impetus and gain in size. They were no longer toy horses and toy riders. They were very real and growing in reality every second. One could see the utter seriousness of the thing, the supreme effort, the rivalry as horse and man strained every muscle to forge to the front. Oh, it was no toy spectacle; they were in fierce and bitter competition, vying horse and man, even the mounted man, vying for the lead, and the glowing eyeballs and the shrunken jockeys, the quiet, the enormous suppleness and the cry. They struck the left-hand turn of the track and rounded it; each horse and the whole band cantered as one in their effort to stay close to the inner railing. And then my attention was drawn to something strange—I don't know why. Perhaps what was about to happen was already happening—a jockey close to the lead, or in the forward half of the pack, a jockey in pale green silks, seemed to be toppling.

I couldn't believe my eyes, and in fact my

mind seemed to cancel the sight and give it another interpretation. But he was toppling—and in another moment, he and his mount disappeared. And then in a furious rush the whole pack pounded by, a haze of hues. I glanced at Martha. She was following with her eyes the leaders as they rounded the turn on our right and entered the straight-away, and I was almost tempted to look that way too, such was the suction of their surge, but instead I looked back. The jockey in green was on the ground, still rolling. The horse had fallen a short way from him and was pawing air and ground trying to regain his footing. The jockey arose, ducked under the inner railing, and limped across the greensward rubbing his dusty white riding breeches; officials were hurrying toward him. And now the horse arose and began running after the pack. But he no longer ran like a race horse. There was something terribly un- gainly and grotesque about his motion—and suddenly I realized why; his further hind leg had been broken. It flopped along beneath him as ludicrous as a stuffed stocking, and as incapable of bearing weight. "Look," I said. "Look, Martha." She withdrew rapt eyes from the finish line, questioningly. "He's broken his leg."

Her expression changed to one of horror, and that was the word she uttered: "Horror!"

"Yes," I said. "Just now."

"Oh, that beautiful animal!"

The horse lurched past us, ran a few more steps and careened against the inner railing. His legs milled beneath him, but he no longer could rise.

"Isn't that simply ghastly!" said Martha.

"Yes."

"How did it ever happen?"

"I'm not sure. Jolted I imagine. I could see something break the rhythm of the race, and then—"

"That poor beautiful animal."

"I guess he's done for."

"Why?"

I pointed. Across the greensward, a small truck had been set in motion, a mortuary truck I supposed. There were booted men

clinging to the sides of the cab. Martha still regarded me questioningly. "I suspect they're going to shoot him."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "No!"

"Well what on earth are they going to do with him? He's done for."

She uttered a cry and suddenly began running down the embankment.

"Wait a minute!" I stretched out a restraining hand.

"No! Please!"

"What's the matter?"

"I don't want to be shot!"

"You?"

"Bullets ricochet. I'm afraid."

"Just a minute then. I want to see what happens." I had gone a few steps down the embankment, and now I climbed up again. It was more or less what I had expected. The truck was rolling to a stop beside the animal. Men had already jumped off. Some kneeled, others squatted about the horse, examining him. There was a brief conference. And then the cluster of conference opened up into a kind of expectant semi-circle, out of which one man strode forward with a pistol and held it close to the horse's head. The report that followed seemed oddly insignificant for so grave and dread an event. I watched them load the carcass aboard the truck, and for some reason a similar scene

on the East Side of long ago returned—an image from long-vanished childhood of a cop shooting a horse fallen in the snow, and the slow winch of the big green van that hauled the animal aboard later. So that was the end? *Ars brevis, vita longa*. I came down from the embankment.

She was smiling now, a little placatingly. "I'm sorry I'm such a sissy."

I shrugged. "What's the difference. I hope I wasn't rude."

"No. You were just yourself."

"Thanks." I laughed. "We come here once in a lifetime, and once in a thousand or a million this happens. And so close."

"Disappointed?"

"No. I didn't bet on him. But the odd thing is when I saw him going down, I felt a sense of loss."

She regarded me sympathetically. "We can see another race if you want to."

"No, not unless you do."

She shook her head.

"Well, lead the way back," I said. "You've got a better sense of direction than I have." I followed her into the narrow and rather somber band of trees that bordered the race track. Beyond lay a glade with a measure of sunlight, and behind us was a scene that I should muse on a great deal, of a horse destroyed when the race became real.

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