

Charlie Ham

I reaches back of the bailin' machine an' gets my bottle of Kamchatka. I blows the paper dust off an' takes a sip. I hears the boy laughin' an sees the funny side of his head (This week lookin' like it been raked by a claw). Then he gone, duckin' down to tie wire round a paper bale. I don' mine none, he's the best partna I ever had.

It's payday today, and we both happy. I comes out an' gives him a hand rockin' the bale off the rollers. The buzza' from the shredder rings an' I ambles over an' pulls out a pile of paper an' feeds it into the bailer chute. The boy comes up side me an' pulls at the paper like some kinda' maniac; pullin' so hard the back of his t-shirt sweat up in a minute. I smiles at the muscles workin' in his arms and back remindin' me a when I was a young'n. Then I says, "Slow down, or theres won't be no work left." Like a smart ass he tells me, "There's always work to do old man."

I worries 'bout that boy. He works too hard. An' that funny weed he smokes all the time makes me nervous. Right after he smokes it he gets a dumb look on his face, then `bout a half-hour later he's all tired out. Still, he keeps workin' like if he slow down, he die. No lunch, jus' eight hours straight. Ya know, an' when he runs outta weed, he talk real good, too good to be a janitor.

Once I asked him how come he is makin' paper bales an' sweepin' up in the shop when he could get trainin' an' be workin' a printing press. He looks at me like he is real angry an' his pug nose starts a twitchin', an' his eyes git real small, an' he says real quiet how he don't have no plans to be a printa', an' how he jus wants to party.

Well, the next day I takes the bus to Santa `nita. I don't listen to the poor old white mens an' the brothers talkin' their stuff `bout the horses. I jus' takes my pint o' Kamchatka out my coat pocket,

takes a sip an', keepin' to myself, waits to try fo' some luck with some a' my money.

Charlie Ham is pretty damn lazy, but I guess that's 'cause he's an old dude. I really don't dig the workers calling him Sambo. And the way he smiles and shakes his head-what an Uncle Tom. If anyone calls me nigger or Sambo, I'll knock them out, fast.

This is going to be a righteous day. I barely managed to leave my herb at the crib to keep my ass clear-headed. Soon I won't have to worry 'bout goin' back to school or doin' this tired job. In the last race I'm puttin' all my money on Rich Cream. The last time he was blocked in the stretch, but today, at fifty to one, man I'll make at least twenty thousand dollars when he wins.

Hold on, is that suave lookin' brotha' Charlie Ham? I walk over to Charlie real cool, and wink at a fine sister on the way, tell her to chill, an' I'll be back when I win. The sound of my boots makes a lot of people turn around as I walk up to Charlie. That's right; I'm bad. I feel like I'm happenin': a winner. "Hey Charlie." I go over and whisper, "Hey man, Rich Cream in the next race." He just laughs.

The race goes off and Rich Cream trails, then moves up eighth, seventh, fifth. In the stretch he closes in on the leader. I lose my cool and yell, "C'mon Rich Cream!" Both the jockeys whip their horses, pushin' their heads toward the finish. The wire comin' up, my jockey pulls his horse's head back, to lose by a whisker.

With all my coin gone, I start to think about the next payday. The crowd, the girl, everything starts to look tired. Feelin' like a chump, as I walk away I nod to Charlie. He waves for me to come over. His vodka breath bothers the shit outta' me. He pulls out a fifty dollar ticket on the winner, a ten to one shot, worth about five hundred cash. "It's a tough game," he whispers. Then with his sad bloodshot eyes lookin' right through me, he tells me I should be in school.