

FOR THE ATTENTION OF
 MR. MERVYN ALEXANDER ROOM 510
 FROM FUNNY CIDE BY SALLY JENKINS

Funny Cide

The oddsmakers, in order to protect themselves, immediately lowered the odds. Jack and Gus then took \$200 each at 75-1. Now the odds fell again.

Jack and Gus visited race books all over the Vegas strip. By the time they were done, they had wagered \$2,000 at odds ranging from 150-1 to 40-1.

But back at the barn, Barclay and Robin weren't willing to bet anything on the horse, given the fact that his breathing still wasn't right. It had now been more than three months since he'd first choked up, and they were no closer to finding an answer. Three different vets had examined him and done throat cultures, but they hadn't found a clue as to what was wrong.

They had tried every kind of antibiotic: Batrol, Amacasin, Genecin, penicillin, and Genecin and penicillin together. The horse was on so many different kinds of antibiotics that he became used to them. Robin could swear that when they came into his stall to treat him each day, he practically rolled his eyes, as if to say, "Oh, God, not that again."

They were beginning to wonder if the horse's condition was not only chronic but incurable, when late one afternoon Barclay wandered into the barn office of an old friend, Dr. Stephen Selway, who was regarded as among the very best veterinary surgeons in the business.

"I have this horse," Barclay said, "and he's the best one I have. But I'm having real problems with him." With that, Barclay launched into a description of Funny Cide's breathing, and the various ways they had treated him. Selway had never seen Funny Cide and didn't know anything about him, but as he listened to Barclay describe the symptoms, they sounded too familiar.

"Does he look like he's sick?" Selway asked.

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"No," Barclay said. "He's got dapples all over him."

Dapples, along with eating habits, were a reliable indicator of whether a horse was healthy. A thoroughbred in perfect condition had a magnificent sheen; its coat stretched tightly across its muscled body and reflected every light and dark spot, so that it looked literally like dappled light.

"Take that horse off the antibiotics," Selway said immediately. "There's nothing really wrong with him. I know what he's got."

"How do you know?" Barclay asked, dumbfounded.

Selway explained that he'd had another patient-horse with similar symptoms: Funny Cide was lacking cilia, the tiny hairs that brush mucus and food from the throat. He'd probably had pneumonia as a baby, Selway said, and the ailment had burned away some of the cilia and left bald patches. "He was probably sick for a few days," Selway said, and then he had gotten better and no one had thought any more about it. But the bald patches left by the pneumonia made his throat clog easily.

Selway said there was a simple solution: Funny Cide needed an expectorant—cough medicine. He prescribed a daily injection to help thin the blockage in the horse's throat, and he warned them that it could take some time. Then he piled the medicines in a large box and gave it to Barclay. Gratefully, he accepted it.

Over the next few days, their regular vet, Dr. George Burch, treated the horse, and his breathing began to clear—slowly. Now the question was whether they could get him fully healthy in time to earn his way into the Derby. One morning, as they tended him, Robin came up with an idea. They were basically treating Funny Cide for head-cold symptoms—so why not use the same remedy you'd use on a child?

"What would be wrong with a transpirator?" she asked Barclay.

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Robin's idea was to give Funny Cide the horse version of a Vicks vaporizer: a transpirator heated up distilled water to 104 degrees and turned it, and any accompanying medicine, into steam. A mask was fitted over the horse's face, and he breathed in the steam and meds.

"It can't hurt," Barclay said, shrugging. "We're running out of things to do."

Robin ordered a transpirator with the help of Jack Knowlton, who did some research to find a distributor on his home computer, but it arrived broken. She reordered it, and the next one didn't work, either, reinforcing Barclay's belief that few things ever went right. Finally, a third transpirator arrived, just three days before the Louisiana Derby. By then, they decided to wait until after the race to try their experiment.

Funny Cide's throat troubles had cost him some training, so Barclay and Robin didn't have extremely high hopes for the Louisiana Derby. Seven trying weeks after the Holy Bull, they arrived in New Orleans.

Funny Cide set the pace early—and then gave it up and seemed beaten when he dropped back to fourth. But then he made a late charge on the rail and somehow finished third. The winner was Peace Rules, the second-best three-year-old colt in Bobby Frankel's barn, behind Empire Maker.

Afterward, Jose Santos told them he hadn't expected such a strong second effort from Funny Cide. Had he known the horse had it in him, they might've won the race. He slid out of the saddle and said, "He surprised me."

Once again, Funny Cide gave Barclay, Robin, and the rest of the Sackatoga Stable reason to believe he could be a Derby horse. Though he hadn't won, he had finished in the money, despite

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months of ill health. (The payday became bigger when the second-place finisher, Kafwain, was later disqualified and Funny Cide was automatically elevated to second place.). They were still learning just how much horse they had. What might he do if he ever ran a healthy race as a three-year-old?

They would find out, once and for all, at the Wood Memorial, which would be run over a mile and an eighth at Aqueduct on April 13. They shipped Funny Cide back to Florida and began to treat him with the transpirator.

Every day for the next five weeks, Funny Cide calmly accepted the mask as Robin slipped it over his narrow copper face. The horse stood stock-still and breathed in the warm vapor and medicine, his eyes half-closed. It looked as though he was napping.

Finally, a week before the Wood, Barclay and Robin asked a vet to scope the horse one more time. They stood around and bit their fingernails while he was examined. Finally, the doctor removed the scope—and pronounced Funny Cide's throat 95 percent clean. At last, on the eve of the most important race of their careers, the horse's physical problems seemed to be solved.

The Wood was a hugely prestigious and dramatic race in its own right, apart from the fact that it was historically the route that many horses took to the Derby. But this version of it was supposed to offer little in the way of theater, because Empire Maker was such an overwhelming favorite at 1-2 odds. While Funny Cide had run gamely in the Louisiana Derby to finish third, Empire Maker had destroyed his competition in the Florida Derby to win by several lengths. The victory had prompted Empire Maker's jockey, Jerry Bailey, to make a bold statement: Empire Maker was not only the favorite to win the Wood, *and* the Kentucky Derby, but a possibility to win the Triple Crown, too. "He's the kind of horse that, if

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Funny Cide

luck goes your way, you could think about all three of them," Bailey said.

Everything in Empire Maker's demeanor seemed to reaffirm the opinion. He had the obvious breeding; it was in his bones. He was an imposing horse, a dark bay whose coat rippled with muscle and tendon, a barrel-chested creature who seemed to exhale speed like steam.

But over in the Tagg barn, it was the opinion of Funny Cide's trainers that their horse was finally breathing well—and he seemed to be getting stronger and stronger as a result. Each time Robin exercised him, he seemed more powerful. He was a whole different horse from the gagging, snorting creature who had barely won the Sleepy Hollow.

On a raw April afternoon at Aqueduct, where the track was muddy, Barclay and Robin prepared Funny Cide for the running of the Wood, and all of the Sackatoga owners came to see whether their horse would go to the Kentucky Derby. "If he runs a big race, we go," Barclay promised them.

As the field of eight horses burst from the gate, a horse named New York Hero took the early lead from the first post. But most of the eyes in the crowd of 19,392 were on Empire Maker. The favorite broke sharply, and settled into third place, biding his time.

Robin and Barclay watched Funny Cide, and as they did so, they swelled with pride. Their horse was second place, and what's more, he was allowing Santos to rate him. He had learned his lessons.

On the far turn, Funny Cide overtook New York Hero and gained the lead. Empire Maker also made his move, and came to Funny Cide on the outside. Now Santos let Funny Cide run. The horses hurtled past the three-sixteenths pole together.

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Funny Cide had the lead momentarily . . . and then Empire Maker surged past him, a length ahead. Santos asked his horse for one more try—and Funny Cide closed on Empire Maker again.

They crossed the line.

The winner was Empire Maker—but by only one-half of a length. The colt bred in central heat and air-conditioning, trained by the famed Bobby Frankel and ridden by the great Jerry Bailey, had won the race, as he was supposed to. But Funny Cide had run stride for stride with him and almost overtaken him at the end.

In the box seats, Robin's eyes welled up, and she began to cry. "It's okay, it's okay," Barclay kept saying. But then he realized she was crying because she was so happy. She was crying, she tried to explain; because the horse was like her child, and he had done everything perfectly, the way he'd been taught, and she was so proud of him. And she was crying because the horse had finally run freely.

Down in the winner's circle, Empire Maker was celebrated as befitted a favorite and a champion. But afterward, Frankel and Bailey seemed somewhat self-conscious because Funny Cide had made the race so close. Frankel pointed out that Bailey had hardly gone to the stick. "He probably would have won easier if Jerry got after him," Frankel told the press.

The remark would be the beginning of a rivalry, and a class war. As far as Barclay Tagg and Robin Smullen were concerned, Empire Maker's victory had by no means been assured.

At any rate, Funny Cide was going to the Kentucky Derby. "He made the decision for us," Barclay said. "We don't have a choice. At a mile and a quarter, he just might beat that other horse."