

Christopher Malo

Morning Promise

There have been many times in my life when I look back and wonder how things would have been different if that one single day, one single moment, had never occurred. If I hadn't gone there, if I hadn't seen Tony, if I hadn't sent him instead of going myself... But I had. Here I am. What the fuck.

Be careful what you pray for, you might actually get it. Time and again I had heard those words. But who the fuck wouldn't pray to win if you are barely getting by? I talk to bill collectors more than my own family. I never really try ducking these guys for some reason. Probably because I know they are right, and I know I owe them money. I almost always answer the phone. All this has gone on for so long I've actually developed a rapport with some of them. Most of them were typical assholes, but a few were ok enough. In the end though it is always the same, yet true, story from me. Another day, another lack of dollars. There is really no one to blame except myself. Working a job at minimum wage with no benefits was tough enough, but there's also the child support payments.

Kayla. She was born when I was in prison, and didn't want to have anything to do with me, which was understandable. That don't mean that it don't hurt. The courts may of sided with me, giving me the right for visitation, but Kayla didn't want it. And that meant more to me than any fucking judge's ruling. Even in Graterford I had cried myself to sleep, silently, almost every night after she was born. Right up until the day of my release. That last time I got sent upstate

I had vowed to change my ways. And I had. Which some days was the reason I felt I was in this shitty situation. Who wants to hire a three time convicted felon with a rap sheet longer than Broad Street?

I sat in my kitchen, instant coffee cooling off in front of me. After all my time locked up, out of all the things I had to deal with in prison that I vowed I would never do on the outside once I hit the bricks, I still hadn't eaten any bologna sandwiches, drank any Tang, washed clothes in my toilet, knuckled up, or said, "Yes sir," for almost six years. None of that. But I couldn't shake drinking instant coffee. And of course, smoking cigarettes.

I opened a fresh pack of Camels, struck a match, and took a drag. I exhaled toward the window, where sunlight poured through making the smoke look like a choreographed dance. It twisted, spun, and then slowed as it hung, suspended in the air. Spitting a little piece of tobacco out, I sipped from my black coffee, my eyes never leaving the lingering cloud. Eventually, it drifted up and out the window. And once it was gone, I was alone again.

For six years I had spent my mornings in this routine. Routines were something else I hadn't been able to shake either. Right on schedule, my thoughts turned to my past, my decisions, my loves, my fuck ups, my scars, my regrets. It was a lot to think about, which is why I never seemed to run out of material during those morning meditations. Kayla's birthday was coming up and of course I had nothing, and no money. I had already maxed out all my credit cards trying to win her back. I never got a phone call or thank you letter from her, but it did not deter me any. I knew she'd be a part of my life. Someday. I hoped. I always felt that if I missed one birthday or

one holiday, that it would reinforce what she was told by her cunt of a mother for the nine years I was away. No way did I want to give her another reason to write me off.

I thought back to that morning in prison, when the C.O. woke me to tell me my daughter had been born. I promised myself, and my little girl, that once I got out I would never forget or leave her. There was no way I would ever break that vow. I had to come up with money. Her mom was no help. Fuck her anyway. To her I was just a sperm donor. To me she was just another drunken mistake. I almost always used rubbers with girls I picked up, but really, with that much heroin and coke shot into my veins who really knew? Five weeks later I got a call, nine months later I got Kayla. Well, her mom got her, and I lost her.

Fuck I need some cash. Part of my parole was to attend those Gamblers Anonymous meetings. I gave them a shot, but it was easy to forge the slip I had to turn into my P.O.. I bet that I could never gamble again if I didn't want to. Besides, I didn't want to spend my time sitting with those degenerate losers. I could stop on my own, and had for two months. But one day at the track wasn't going to fuck me up. I didn't have that much to gamble with anyway. There was no way that I was going to lose. Plus, I was feeling lucky. I could just feel it.

Mashing out the cigarette butt, I took the coffee and went into the bedroom to get dressed. I took out my father's funeral mass card, kissed it, and tucked it in my breast pocket. I always believed that it brought me good luck but if you looked over my life, I would probably be the only one to think this.

I had not even made it from my back door to the street and already felt the heat and humidity. Sweat trickled down my back, and when I opened the door to my '72 Monte Carlo it blasted me with heat that almost knocked me on my ass. Standing in the shade of a delivery truck, I smoked another Camel with the car door open, waiting for things to cool a little.

I began the forty-five minute drive to the Philadelphia Park Racetrack, making a stop at a newsstand to pick up a Daily Racing Form. Some of my first memories were of being at the track with my old man. Countless afternoons spent there. Him teaching me what he knew. Piece by piece. Bit by bit. It began with the Daily Racing Form, which handicapped each race and gave information about the history, training, and jockeys for each horse.

It was good to go through the paper and see how a horse had been running. Many people, especially those new to horse racing, thought that it began and ended with reading the racing form. You could really spot the guys who knew what the deal was by looking to see who was standing at the fence watching the horses come out of the stables. Those were the ones who knew the real information. The kind of info that wasn't, and couldn't be, printed in any form. Watching the gait, the attitude, the behaviors of the horses minutes before they raced told a lot.

Along that fence are the veterans of the track. Old men with cigars stuffed in their mouths, scribbling furiously on their crib sheets. Tony Chops. Ugly Al. Jersey Joe. I know them all. They all know me. While each had their own system for picking the winners, they each had their own superstitions too. They made little sense, but the old guys stuck to them and swore by them. One guy never bet on a horse that had tape on his front legs. Sal would never bet on a horse whose

jockey wore red, or a diamond jersey. Tony Chops' golden rule was to only bet on ones whose name was an even number of syllables. Never odd. And like a fishing tale, each had a story of how their little quirk paid off. Usually about fifteen to twenty years ago.

At the park, I slid my car into a space in the lot and sat for a minute looking over the Racing Form. Some races I liked. Others I didn't. I began to make notes when I heard a light tapping on the passenger side door. Glancing over, I saw a familiar face. Tony's. He was an old friend of my father's, and he had always taken a liking to me. He had tried to help me out different times since Dad died, but like everyone else found out, when you are hell bent on your own demise, there is nothing anyone can do.

"Tonyyyyyyyyyyyyy..." I smiled.

"Good to see you kid. Been a while. Can I get in?"

"Sure," I replied. "But believe it or not, the a/c in this beauty died long ago."

"When you are my age Alex, almost everything has died long ago."

I gave a little chuckle and realized that I had no idea exactly how old Tony was.

"Eighty one."

"How'd you know what I was thinking?"

"I'm good kid. I'm goooooood. Remember that."

"Well Tone, if you are so good can you give me the trifecta in the 7th?"

Partly being a wise-ass, I was also serious, hoping to capitalize on the scoop Tony surely knew. Being a staple at the track for so many decades, he had struck up friendships and always had the lowdown from the stable-hands. A few pockets lined with a wad of Jacksons would ensure the real insider information. Information from inside the trainer's own camp. Stable-hands aren't the most well paid -or scrupulous- employees. And if you greased the right palms you could end up finding out things. Which horses looked good. What ones weren't feeling or running so hot. Which jockeys were out of shape or abusing pills. Who was out too late last night partying with the ladies. Or which trainer had been more concerned with Peruvian marching powder than with training their horse. There was always inside information, and Tony always seemed to know it. He squinted, and looked me over.

"Can you keep a secret Alex?" he asked.

"Yea," I replied.

"So can I..." he shot back as he tapped my knee with his racing form and winked.

"C'mon. You can't see the action or lay bets from your car. Let's head inside. Besides, it's hotter than a virgin on prom night in your car. We need some shade and a cold one. Or four."

He was right. Well, at least about the heat. Alcohol was not Alex's friend anymore. In the rehab tier of prison they told me when I got home and people offered me alcohol, to tell them I couldn't because I was allergic and would break out. But in my case, it made me break in. Break in cars, break in houses, break in businesses...

After Tony got his beer and I grabbed a water, we strolled over to the rail between the stables and the track. It was still early, so we found space under the shade of a tree. The first race wouldn't begin until 12:25, so we had about an hour to bullshit and make some decisions. Tony began looking through his notes, and was making small talk to a familiar face with an unfamiliar name standing next to him. I turned towards the track and lit a cigarette, hating the fact that I had very limited funds to work with. I felt a lot of pressure.

My thoughts began to trip one into the next until I drifted off. I was so lost in thoughts of Kayla that the world ceased to exist. I couldn't hear Tony talking. I no longer saw the racetrack. The smell of summertime was gone. Just memories of time spent with Kayla. I have never actually spent any time with her, not even a minute, but in my head we have spent countless days, weeks, and months together. A diary full of memories, except for the fact that they never happened.

It was a trick I started playing on myself when I was doing my bid. After weeks of crying in my bunk, in an effort to save my sanity, I began creating these memories of what she and I would be doing if we were together. I played them over and over in my head until they seemed real. Except they were painfully hollow. People do what they need to get by. I know this as much as the next person.

I thought back to one of the days spent with Kayla. She was about four years old and already a handful. It was a bright, early summer day, and she was as precious as ever. Not only did I think I was incapable of producing such an amazing creature, I didn't even think God could have come up with something so beautiful. But clearly one of us had, and she danced around in the grass,

talking and singing to someone who wasn't there. I had a surprise for her.

"Come here baby. I have something for you."

"Is it a present Daddy?"

"Uh huh."

"My Little Pony?!"

"Nooooo...."

"Polly Pockets?!"

"Nope."

"What is it? What is it?"

"It's a bubble blower. Look..."

I pulled the toy out of a bag and Kayla grabbed it. Her eyes widened, as did her smile. I opened the box and poured bubble mix into the container, then handed the bubble blower to Kayla.

"Dip it in the cup and get the bubble water, then press this button."

In her awkward four year old way, she did just that. After the whirr of the fan, a trail of bubbles shot into the sky. A beaming smile spread across her face, and her eyes squinted as she followed the trail of bubbles into the sky. She was completely lost in the moment. Completely mesmerized by the bubbles. After a few seconds, the hundreds of bubbles had all popped and disappeared. Again, she dipped the bubble maker into the solution, and pressed the button. Same thing happened. Big bubbles. Big smiles. I thought of how life couldn't get any better at that moment,

and how all the things I stress over seem so insignificant compared to this. And then it appeared. I tried to push it away, but I knew it was there and soiling my memory. The fact it wasn't real. The bubbles, the girl, the smiles. None of it was real.

Slowly, I began to hear sounds. Mumbles at first. Then louder and deeper. I realized I was staring out over the empty winners circle as my brain placed Tony's voice.

"Kid. Kid. Earth to Alex. I like One Chance Fancy in the third. Whatcha think?"

Jesus Christ. What do I know? What do I care? My faux bliss disturbed, I slowly came back to reality. Fuck reality.

I guess more time had passed as I was daydreaming than I realized, and it was almost post time for the first race. I still hadn't really gone through the racing form, talked to Tony, or paid enough attention to the horses to make any decisions yet. I was only working with about fifty dollars, so I had to make some pretty fucking good decisions. I needed to win, but I wasn't scared. Professional gamblers didn't look at it like gambling. It has little to do with the "rush." The "rush" is for amateurs in those GA meetings. I was, or used to be, a pro.

I told Tony I was going to lay off the first few races. He let me know the big money was in the seventh race anyway, so I had some time. Shaking his head, he strode off in the direction of the betting area. I knew Tony would head to the place near the grandstand where we always watched the horses race, so I wandered over with my head buried in my paper. The seventh looked

strong. Nine horses were scheduled to run, and none had scratched so far. There were a couple of longshots, which I was going to need to work if I expected to make any real money. From what Tony had mentioned before, I knew he had some good inside dirt. I expected him to tell me. And he did.

Bubba's Caper had been running strong, but seemed to race better in muddier conditions. Pompamento had been working with a great trainer and great jockey. He had lost a ton of money in the past to Westerly Flow, and I wasn't about to put all I had on that scrub, despite the odds being pretty good that he would win. Or at least place. Looking across the columns at the horse's names, records, earnings, and jockeys, my wager began to take shape. I did like Ten Queens, Honeycomb Gus and... holy shit. I realized that the longshot in the 7th was a horse named Beautiful Kayla. It couldn't be. There was just no fucking way possible. My head began to swim, but with no booze or drugs to cloud my vision, the only thing I could blame it on was a cocktail of serendipity and delusional hope. But there it was, right in front of my face in black and white. With impeccable timing Tony plopped down next to me and snapped me out of my trance.

“We are good to go. Hundred on Barley Charlie to win in the first, and a hundred on Pencil in the second for the Daily Double.”

With that, we sat and watched the first two races. Wouldn't you fucking know it? Tony Chops was a winner. Parlayed that two hundred into almost a grand. I needed money like that. I started to bend Tony's ear hoping to cash in, literally, on what he knew.

“What you know about the seventh Tone? How’s it look?”

“A few friends of mine in the stable said to stay away from Tens Queens. Looked like the trainer pushed her too hard during the week and now she is lagging. Told me to put my money on Honeycomb Gus.”

That was good to hear. Kinda. I had to come up with a third horse to bet the trifecta. We both agreed that My Friend Lumpy might just be the sleeper. I didn’t mention my number three horse was going to be Beautiful Kayla. I didn’t want to be swayed by what Tone thought, over what I knew. Through the course of the next few races the conversation went between what Tony was going to wager, catching up on recent times, and reminiscing over old times. A few minutes before each race, he would stand up, stretch, leave to bet, and come back with another beer. He’d stop for a shot at the bar on the way to bet and return with a cold one after. I figured he was up a few grand. I wasn’t the jealous type, but I could sure use some of that money. Even a part of it.

The sixth race came to an end. I lit a match, then a cigarette, and fixed my eyes on my handicapping notes. I glanced between the Daily Racing Forum and my crib sheet for the hundredth time, as if someone had snuck in additional information when I wasn’t looking. Taking a little walk by myself, I ventured over to the paddock to get a look at the horses between the stable and the track to see if anything caught my eye. I felt pretty good walking back to our seats, and took out a piece of paper and wrote my bet down on it. After many beers and several shots, I didn’t trust Tony’s ability to remember my wager between our seats and the betting window. Tearing off a corner of my paper, I put my bet down exactly as I wanted it placed. In very neat and legible writing, I had written it all down for him.

\$50

7th race

1st place: Honeycomb Gus

2nd place: My Friend Lumpy

“This one’s for you baby...” I said under my breath as I wrote:

3rd place: Beautiful Kayla

“You say something, kid?” Tony asked as he finished off his Michelob.

I told him, “No,” as I handed him the piece of paper. I reached into my pants and fished out my fifty.

“Bring me back one of those beers too,” I told him. “None of that Michelob bullshit either. A Guinness.”

“It’s your funeral kid.” Tony slurred as he turned and set off to hit the bar, the betting window, and back to the bar.

Barely making it back for the start of the seventh, I had just finished my second Camel as Tony returned with our beers. Handing me both the beer and my ticket, I put the ticket in my shirt pocket, next to the mass card. The starting gate was in place on the backstretch, and I stood to watch the horses load into the gate. Another match, another Camel. The mix of sulfur and tobacco hit my senses, and I realized that before I would even finish my smoke, the whole thing would be over. I’d either be sitting on top of the world, or crushed by its weight. I took a long

drink from the frosty bottle, hating myself for doing it but thought, “Fuck it. Too late now.”

There were only eight horses in the race. Pompamento was scratched minutes before the race. All my horses had pretty good gate positions, except Honeycomb Gus who was on the outside, but since he was favored, I wasn't too worried. One of the horses seemed to be bucking in the starting gate, which might spook some of the horses. It certainly made me a little more edgy. Suddenly all the track personnel were gone, and there was silence as the horses waited for the sound of the starter's pistol. Seconds seemed like hours. I couldn't tell if everyone felt the tension in the air, or if it was just me. A lot of stars and planets had to be aligned for me on this day. I needed all three horses to place in the exact order I had picked. Without realizing it, I reached to my breast pocket and touched my father's funeral mass card. “C'mon pop. I need you today. Bring me some luck.”

And with that, they were off. The horses shot out of the gate in an explosion. Hooves pounding the dirt made a noise like cannons being fired, and the colorful designs of the jockey's jerseys blazed radiantly in the summer sun. Five and a half furlongs between shit out of luck and payday. It would take almost a furlong, around the first corner, for the horses to fall into some type of pack position. Even after that first turn I knew the race was far from over, which was why I wasn't too worried when Honeycomb Gus still hadn't made up for his poor gate position. But he had made progress, and both My Friend Lumpy and Beautiful Kayla were towards the front. Westerly Flow and Bubba's Caper were in a duel for last place. It didn't look like any of them were burning themselves up out of the gate. It was a long race, so that was important. The sound of rolling thunder grew louder and louder as they passed the pole and turned to race down

the straightaway passing in front of the grandstand. The entire crowd was on their feet, yelling and cheering. Like a wave in a sea, heads swung from left to right as the horses made their pass. I stood silently. Mesmerized.

Making the turn at the far end of the track, they headed to the backstretch. This is where the racehorses began to race and the jockeys began to jockey for position. Beautiful Kayla was holding her own in fourth place as they passed the pole. Honeycomb Gus had pressed up to third, and My Friend Lumpy was solid in second. Morning Promise was in first by a length and a half, but she had started out of the gate too fast, and it was clear she was not going to be able to keep her speed until the end. Shake the Dust was making power moves of her own and had quickly come up from seventh, and was in fifth, with clearly more gas in her tank. Coming around the back bend, the jockeys rose from their seated positions and let the horses have it with their riding crops. Beating the horse's flanks feverishly, they made that last turn into the home stretch.

The roar of the crowd was deafening as people pumped their arms in the air and strained to see where their horse was. I stood on my chair and placed a hand on Tony's beefy shoulder for support, ignoring the people's shouts behind me about blocking their view. Shake the Dust had fallen to third during the last turn, and was now in fifth. Honeycomb Gus had come on real strong and was pulling away in first by a length and a half. My Friend Lumpy was in second place and not relinquishing her position there. The real battle taking place on the track that sweltering day was between two of the horses for third place. The longshot Beautiful Kayla and Morning Promise. Morning Promise had pulled ahead by a half a length and seemed to be making her move to solidify her place. But Beautiful Kayla would not let that happen. As soon

as Morning Promise got ahead by that short distance, Beautiful Kayla's jockey unleashed a few lashes from the crop and they were neck and neck, stride for stride. Then it happened. The stuff dreams and nightmares were made of. Beautiful Kayla pulled ahead. By a head, by a half a length, by a full length. If there was any possibility I was dreaming, I was suddenly brought back by the cigarette in my hand that had burnt down to the filter and singed my finger.

I dropped into my seat before the race was over to listen to the announcers call. Dumbstruck, I sat in the ocean of people cheering at the screaming at the top of their lungs. With some horses obviously out of the race, some of the shouting was profanity laced. Those weren't the voices I was focused in on though. It was the voice over the loud speaker that had my full attention.

“And coming down to the wire, here they come! Honeycomb Gus clearly in the lead takes it by two and a half lengths followed by My Friend Lumpy in second aaaaaand Beautiful Kayla in third!”

Impossible, I thought. Did I just hear that right? For the second time that day, someone read my mind.

“Again, that's Honeycomb Gus in first, My Friend Lumpy in second, and Beeeeeeautiful Kayla in third.”

It had been a clean race, and less than a minute later the official standings flashed across the board. It took all of three seconds before it registered. Leaping from my seat I began to yell. Since there weren't too many winners, or big winners, many people turned to look at the guy

jumping and screaming. I figured that on a fifty dollar bet, with those odds, I was about to collect a \$1,700 payoff. Kayla was certainly going to have the best birthday ever.

“Tony! Can you fucking believe it, man?! I’m going down to the winner circle to get a closer look. You coming?”

“Nah kid. I’m done for the day. I think I’m gonna get outta here.”

“Are you kidding me?! You at least have to let me buy you a drink! You're the one who really helped me earn this. It’s the least I can do Tone.”

“I’ll take a raincheck. Next time, ok? Next time...” Extending my hand, I placed the other on his shoulder and looked him in the eye.

“Thank you Tony. Thank you,” I said as I firmly shook his hand.

“Don’t thank me kid. Look, I’ll see you around. Hopefully it won’t be another few years again. Good luck.”

I laughed as he said that, and headed for the winners circle. My mind overflowed with the realization of the amount of luck, or skill, that I clearly had. I stood by the rail facing the horse, jockey, trainer, and owner in the winner’s circle. Despite trying to enjoy the moment, I was already wondering what I could get Kayla, *my* beautiful Kayla, for her birthday. Clothes? Jewelry? Shoes? All of the above? Shit, I couldn’t take it anymore. That ticket was burning a fucking hole in my pocket. I headed to the betting window, and pulled both pieces of paper from my shirt pocket. First I kissed my Dad’s mass card and whispered a quick, “Thank you,” and after I put it safely back, I clutched my winning ticket. In my hand I held a small two inch by three inch piece of white paper worth almost two grand, give or take, depending on the final odds when the betting had closed. I stared at the thin little wisp of paper. And I couldn’t believe my

fucking eyes.

I read that ticket over, and over, and over, and over. No matter how many times my eyes traced the outline of those tiny black shapes laying on a bed of white, they never seemed to change.

“Philadelphia Park Racetrack”

“7th race”

“Trifecta”

“\$50.00”

“1st place: Honeycomb Gus”

“2nd place: My Friend Lumpy”

”3rd place: Morning Promise”

My brain tried to make sense of it. I suddenly had a pounding headache, and I fumbled for a Camel. It was then that it hit me like a baseball bat in the face.

Hon-ey-comb Gus. Four.

My Friend Lum-py. Four.

Beau-ti-ful Kay-la. Five.

Tony Chops never bet on horses with an odd number of syllables in their name. Tony Chops never bet on horses with an odd number of syllables in their name. Tony Chops never bet on horses with an odd number of syllables in their name...

I had no idea if Tony was too drunk to remember that bet was for me, if in his mind his rules applied to me, or if he just didn't care. It didn't matter. My ticket was worthless. Absolutely worthless.

The drive back to my apartment barely registered. Dropping my keys on the counter, I sat down at the kitchen table and smoked a cigarette in complete silence as I stared out the window. You might think my mind was racing a million miles an hour, but you would have been wrong. Nothing. Just, nothing.

Halfway through my Camel, I reached into my shirt pocket, and again, took out both pieces of paper. I held them, stared blankly at them, and with little thought lit them both on fire with the cherry from my cigarette and watched as they burned in the ashtray. I stubbed out my smoke, stood, and walked into my bedroom. I undressed myself completely, and even though it was barely four o'clock in the afternoon, crawled into bed.

They started out slowly, the tears hitting my pillow. After a few moments, they flowed freely. I sobbed quietly, without a sound. Closing my eyes, I began to drift off...

Kayla was about twelve or thirteen now. Hard to tell exactly at that age. Moving through puberty, she wasn't quite comfortable with her body. Slightly awkward but still radiating that childlike beauty. We were sitting on that same porch, on a glorious summer day.

“Dad, how come you didn’t send me anything on my birthday?”

“It’s a long story baby. I’m so sorry...”

“Do you remember the time we sat on the porch and played with the bubble blower?”

“I do sweetie, I do. What do you remember about that?”

“I remember how happy you looked as I ran around blowing all those bubbles in the air. I remember the smile on your face. You know I miss you.”

“You know what Kayla? I miss you too.” She leaned over and kissed me on my cheek. I stood up and began to walk away as tears poured down my face.

“I love you Daddy.”

“I love you too. Goodbye Kayla.” And like that, she was gone.

Forever.

Beautiful Kayla.