

The Great American Church Derby

A Short Story

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Ring! Ring!

Just what I needed – a cell phone call!

For a moment, I considered ignoring the call, but Jenny was sick. Maybe she needed a bottle of aspirin or a cold remedy from the pharmacy. I hit the pause button on the Nordic exercise unit with my right hand, stopping the treadmill, and grabbed my cell phone with the other hand without paying attention to the caller's ID.

"Yes," I said as I flipped the phone open.

"Frank, it's Eddy. Need to see you right away."

"Good morning, Eddy." I put a hand on my waist and shook my head. After catching my breath, I added, "You've caught me at a bad time. I'm in the middle of my morning workout at LA Fitness. Could we meet a little later, say an hour from now?"

"No, it's too important. Need to see you right away," he said. "I'm at the Starbucks on Winchester Road. A coffee and a muffin are waiting here for you."

"But –"

Click!

I kicked the treadmill, but fortunately held my tongue in check. Then, I tossed the towel over my shoulder and headed for the door.

"See you Frank," said the blond receptionist sitting at the front desk.

I ignored her. The smiley face, which was usually located under my bushy mustache, was missing. To be honest, my whole facial expression probably looked more like Snively Whiplash than a happy Christian businessman. I was ticked off. Not because of the phone call, but because painstaking discipline was the foundation of my business success. And each day, it began with a morning workout; but not that day.

I jumped in my Toyota pickup and looked in the visor mirror. The reflection revealed a sixty-year old who needed a shave and a shower. My t-shirt and exercise shorts were sopping wet with sweat. Perspiration beads covered my bald head. Turning toward the passenger seat, I saw just what I needed, a Boston Red Sox baseball cap. I put it on.

Bald men wear hats, I thought, especially sweaty, bald guys who are ten pounds overweight.

As I drove, I looked over my hometown of Temecula, California. I now considered it a great place to live, but moving here had been Jenny's idea, not mine. I was a Los Angeles city-guy who loved the Dodgers, Lakers, Rams, Hollywood Bowl and everything else in LA. But Jenny wanted a garden; and owning a garden in LA required a movie star's income which I lacked then, and now.

So, twenty years ago, as a birthday present, I purchased a home with a big yard in Temecula. She was so thrilled that she vowed to keep us in fresh vegetables for the rest of our lives. Has she faithfully kept her promise? Not even close. Jenny's gardening dreams wilted, along with the vegetables and flowers, in Temecula's sweltering heat during our first summer here. That fall, we dug up the garden and the whole back yard, putting in a pool and spa.

Now, every so often, when the situation demanded it, I said, "Hey, Jenny, where's our vegetables?"

She always smiled for a second or two, before giving me that look of hers, the one that would freeze the Pacific Ocean solid if it were aimed in that direction. Then, she usually added, "So, Mr. Frank, where's my cottage at Lake Tahoe? The one you promised me when I agreed to your marriage proposal."

"Touché, my love" was my standard reply.

I took a hard right into Starbuck's parking lot and parked next to Eddy's Honda. As I entered the coffee shop, a booming voice said, "Hey Frank, over here." Without slowing down, I headed toward the voice.

Eddy Harrison and I were a matched pair of opposites. I was tall, overweight, bald, married, and white; Eddy was short, thin, a full head of hair, confirmed bachelor, and black. Even spiritually, we were opposites. I was a Baptist who believed in studying the Bible for all of my answers; and Eddy was a charismatic, tongue-talking, prayer warrior of some sort or other who believed God spoke to him in varieties of ways. We had a head-banging Christian relationship, but in spite of our contrasts, we were best friends and real estate partners.

"Did you remember cream?" I asked, removing the lid from the coffee cup.

He shrugged. "Sorry, I forgot." He drummed his fingers on the table, impatiently waiting for me to settle down.

I shook my head; then picked up the cup and tromped over to the condiments' table. There, I added half-and-half cream to the dark coffee. I stirred it, and returned to Eddy's table, sitting down in a chair opposite him.

He pointed at my clothing. "Tough workout, huh?"

In comparison, he was dressed in a pair of dark slacks and a crisp white shirt with a yellow paisley tie. He looked like he had just stepped out of a *GQ* advertisement for affluent businessmen.

"Tough – yes. But not nearly long enough," I said, sipping coffee. "Now, what's your problem?" I raised the blueberry muffin to my mouth.

"You are not going to believe what happened to me this morning."

"Okay – you're probably right, but tell me anyway."

His eyes flashed. "I had a dream –"

I interrupted. "Oh boy! Some charismatic mumbo-jumbo stuff that I will refute within seconds of hearing it." I gazed at him with a look that spoke volumes about what I thought about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. "You wrecked my morning schedule over one of your crazy dreams? What's wrong with you?" I started to stand up.

He raised his hands in surrender. "Hold on. Sit down – please," he whispered as he leaned across the table. "This dream is from heaven. I guarantee it. What do you have to lose? After all, you're already here. You might as well hear me out while you're

enjoying some delicious coffee and a tasty muffin – which I paid for out of the commissions which I brought *our* way last week on that over-priced condo.” He winked his got-you wink at me.

“Well, okay, I’ll listen,” I said, caving in to his friendly shakedown. “But remember: scripture states that dreams need interpretations and I am a born-again skeptic. So, don’t expect me to swallow any charismatic fruitcake malarkey, okay?”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, looking down at his hands. “That’s why I called you first, just to check everything out.” Eddy was a smoothie who knew how to butter my bread with a little old-fashioned flattery.

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

Eddy sat back in his chair and was silent for a few moments. He sipped his coffee and finished the doughnut. Then, he pushed the paper bag aside and began his story.

“I was tired and went to bed early last night,” he said. “I was really out of it. But sometime, early this morning, I heard a voice say, ‘Eddy, wake-up. The race is beginning.’ The voice did not awaken me out of my sleep, but instead, I was awakened *in* my sleep. Does that make sense?” He raised his eyebrows toward me.

“Your dreams never make sense,” I spit out. Then, I softened my attitude and added, “Okay, maybe the voice just wanted your full attention.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” he replied as he swept some crumbs into the paper bag and balled it up. “Now, it was a first class production, sort of a Cecil B. DeMill epic-type of dream with a cast of thousands. But mind you, there was no theme music or opening credits, just the dream.”

Eddy was on a roll; and to be honest, he had me hooked.

“As the dream began, I found myself sitting in the second tier of grandstand seats at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky,” he said, again raising his eyebrows at me. “You know – the track where the Kentucky Derby is held every year?”

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “Of course, everyone knows that.”

“Just checking you out. I’m not sure Baptists know anything about horse racing,” he said with a grin. Then, he continued, “My seat was perfect. It was right across from the finish line and high enough that no one blocked my view. And talk about a crowd of people – the grandstands and the track’s infield were jam-packed. Maybe, a hundred and fifty-thousand people. But to be honest, no attendance figures were given; it’s just a guess on my part.”

He paused a beat. “But listen to this,” he said. “The entire crowd was divided into color groups. The reds sat together. Blues together. Whites together. And there were greens, yellows, blacks, oranges, pinks and others – twenty different colors in all.”

“Slow down,” I said, trying to visualize what he was saying. “Color groups? Was it skin color?” Even though I was skeptical, the left side of my brain was hungry for details.

He shook his head. “No, no,” he said. “Though all races were represented in the dream, the groups’ colors came from the women’s hats which every lady wore and the men’s sport coat blazer jackets which every man had on. Each group’s hats and blazers were the exact same color. There were no color variations within any of the groups.”

“Why was that?” I said.

He reached over and broke off a piece of my ignored muffin sitting on the table in front of me. Then, he ate it.

“Eddy!” I exclaimed.

“Sorry, man,” he said with a grin. “But you really need to lose weight, right? These muffins are extra bad. And anyway, what would Jenny say if she knew about the muffin? Doesn’t she want you to eat fewer sugars and more fruits?” Once again, he gave me his got-you wink.

“Whatever?” I said. “But you didn’t answer my question, did you?” I slid the muffin out of his reach.

“Hold your horses. Your question will be answered soon enough.”

“Sorry.”

Eddy’s cell phone rang. He reached down and switched it off without checking to see who it was. Then, he glanced at his watch before he resumed.

“The next thing which happened in the dream was that the track announcer said, ‘The entries are at the gates.’ I looked to my left, down the track at the starting gates, about a quarter mile away. There were twenty stalls filled with what looked like horses and jockeys wearing different colored silks. Each was anxiously waiting for the bell. Then, the bell rang. The announcer said, ‘They’re off.’ Twenty horses were heading our direction in their first pass by the grandstands.”

He thought for a moment before reaching across the table and flicking my arm with his hand. “Your answer is coming up, okay?”

Instinctively, I sheltered the muffin. “Okay.”

“As they passed in front of the stands, I realized something,” he said. “The horses were not really horses, but rather, they were churches shaped into the form of horses. And the jockeys were not really jockeys. They were pastors. Each pastor – ”

Here we go, I thought, fruitcake time. It’s starting to sound like the stuff that happened at the Toronto Revival. This is too much.

“Wait just a second,” I said, not able to hold back any longer.

“Just a moment, okay?” he said in a patient voice. “Okay – please?”

I sighed. “Well, okay.”

He nodded. “Thanks, brother.” Then, he continued, “Each pastor-jockey was decked out in a suit and tie combination which matched one of the color groups watching the race. The church-horses had matching saddle blanket colors. Do you understand now?”

I looked over my raised coffee cup and nodded. Eddy was revved up, but he seemed more antsy than usual.

“The different color groups cheered for their particular entries. Shouts of “Go Blue”, “Yea White”, “Pink’s best” or whatever filled the air. Numerous fights broke out here and there throughout the crowd as the groups argued over who was the best. It was a competitive no-holds-barred event on the track and in the crowd,” he said as he squirmed around in his chair.

What is bothering him, I thought, is this one of those charismatic things? Like being slain in the Spirit or Holy Ghost laughter. This is too much, if it is.

“And you should have seen the pastor-jockeys whipping their mounts. They were walloping them. And, believe it or not, whenever they had an opportunity, they were hitting each other with their whips. Each pastor-jockey was fighting to move his church-horse ahead of the other ones by any means possible. All wanted to win. But even with

all their individual efforts, they were clumped together, neck and neck, as the mounts galloped around the first turn.”

Then, Eddy stood up. “Sorry. I’ll be right back,” he said, looking over his shoulder.

“What?”

“Need a quick restroom break. I’ve been up for hours and have had too much coffee.” He hurried toward the back of the coffee shop.

I sat there wondering about Eddy’s dream. Was it really from God? If so, then why was it given to Eddy instead of a Billy Graham or a Greg Laurie. Or heaven forbid, Oral Roberts. What can he do with it? Who does he know?

Oh well, I thought, though his dream has a funny smell to it, I need to wait and see how all this plays out.

Eddy walked back, rubbing his hands together; and then finally, on his slacks. He sat back down and winked. “You ready?” he said. I nodded.

He cleared his throat and sipped some coffee. “Okay, I’m ready,” he said. “Now, where was I?”

I shook my head. “I think your church-horses were rounding the first corner. Neck and neck, weren’t they? Or something like that?” I said in a dry monotone.

“Thanks,” he said. “Glad to see you’re listening.” He paused a moment, collecting his thoughts.

“As the church-horses moved around the first turn, the light-blue mount shot ahead, almost as if his after-burners had kicked in. It was instantly ten lengths ahead and moving on down the track. Its pastor-jockey was hanging on for dear life. He no longer whipped the church-horse or the other pastor-jockeys. His focus was totally on hanging on and not letting go of the reins,” he said. “When the other pastor-jockeys saw the light-blue church-horse breaking away from the pack, they no longer whipped the other pastor-jockeys, but instead, they whipped their church-horses even harder, trying to overtake the light-blue mount. But to me, it looked like the race was all over except for the shouting; no one had a chance of catching the light-blue church-horse. It was a sure winner.”

He laughed; then, put a hand over his mouth. “You know how dreams can get a little weird sometimes. Well, things starting getting weird in the grandstands and the track’s infield at that moment.” He shook his head; then added, “Really weird.”

“Weird, huh? How so?” I asked. Now, I thought, here comes the Toronto Revival stuff. I knew it – I just knew it.

“Well,” he said, “a group of cheerleaders with short light-blue skirts, matching sweaters, megaphones, and pompoms jumped out of the middle of the light-blue group. They began cheering, ‘We’re #1; join us. Join us. We’re #1; join us. Join us.’ Over and over, they repeated this cheer and did cartwheels and somersaults in their excitement. It looked like a UCLA college football game. The whole light-blue group was on their feet, cheering along at the top of their lungs and holding index fingers in the air, signifying they were number one.”

I blinked at the thought of such a scene. “How did the other color-groups react to this turnabout?” I asked.

He flinched slightly. “Not well – not well at all,” he said. “In fact, the other color-groups booed the light-blue group and threw garbage at them. It appeared that the success of the light-blue group had created a unity amongst the other color-groups. A unity of

dislike towards the light-blues. Sort of like how everyone hated the New York Yankees when I was growing up because they always won the World Series.”

“Hmm!” I exclaimed. If it wasn’t Eddy’s dream, I thought, and my trusted pastor was telling the story, I’d tell him what I think happened to the light-blue church-horse.

Without engaging my brain, my lips moved, and I whispered, “I have an idea.”

“What?” he replied in shocked amazement. “You have a brainstorm about what happened? Tell me. I’m interested in hearing it.”

I could have shot myself. Here I was, knowing his dream was charismatic hooley-phooley, and now, I was trying to help him understand it. Sometimes, sixty-year olds have brains of mush.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t know for sure. Tell me a little more, okay?”

He raised an eyebrow and gave me a skeptical eye. “Okay, but don’t try holding back on me. I can always tell when you are doing that,” he said. His words hung in the air for a few seconds, causing a chilly atmosphere between us. Then, he winked.

“The chaos continued until the light-blue church-horse reached the bottom of the backstretch and turned into the final turn. The mount was twenty lengths ahead. Then, the race-track bettors’ lament happened: ‘The nag died on the track.’ The light-blue church-horse slowed down, allowing the other church-horses to catch up. It was neck and neck again. Pastor-jockeys were whipping their mounts and each other, trying to win somehow, someway.”

“Revival,” I blurted out as my thoughts came together in a final cymbal clash. “That’s it.”

He swallowed the bait. “Revival?”

What was wrong with me, I thought. Just let him finish his fantasy. Why was I encouraging him? That was the last thing he needed.

Again, I cleared my throat.

“Do you have a cold?” he said. “Or are you holding back on me?”

I blew out a deep breath. “Maybe the light-blue church-horse and pastor-jockey underwent a revival,” I whispered, hoping not to encourage him. “It’s just that I’ve been reading about revivals. You know – First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, Businessmen’s Prayer Revival, Welsh Revival – ”

“And the Azusa Street Revival,” he said with a toothy smile.

“No not that one.”

“I’m surprised that a strong Baptist like you would read about – ”

“Yes, I read about revivals, okay?”

His face stiffened for a moment, then collapsed into a smile. “You are full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“It seems that way.”

“Revival,” he said as he rubbed his chin. “You might have something there.”

The conversation died for a few moments before he picked it up again. “Here’s what I think,” he said leaning over the table in his excitement. “You’re absolutely right. The light-blue church-horse and pastor-jockey underwent a revival. The pastor-jockey quit beating his mount and the other pastor-jockeys, and just held on as it accelerated forward.”

“Okay,” I said without enthusiasm.

“Revivals are when the Holy Spirit breathes on a group. It is a sovereign act of God. Man has little to do with it except for putting up a few extra sails and riding along with the wind currents. So, it was a revival which pushed the church-horse ahead.”

I needed to stop this train before it got out of control. “What about the reactions by the other color-groups? And the cheerleaders?” I said.

“From what I’ve studied, revivals aren’t usually accepted by outside groups. Many times, the other groups may even become persecutors of the revival,” he said. “And as far as the cheerleaders go, revivals by their very nature tend to breed some excesses out of their successes.”

“But the light-blue horse slowed down –”

He understood where I was going and broke in. “All revivals end. Then, churches return to their day-to-day life.”

“Okay, whatever.”

He reached across the table and grabbed my arm. The muffin was gone, so I did not flinch. “Wait till you hear what happened next.”

“Bring it on.”

“For some reason,” he said, “I took my eyes off the race and looked down the track where the starting gates had been. They were gone, but what I saw shocked me.”

“Yeah?”

“I saw an ordinary plow horse pulling a gigantic plow, ripping up the race track. A weathered farmer wearing bib overalls and a straw hat had his hands on the plow. The leather reins were looped around his neck. He paid no attention to the crowd or any of the color-groups, he was working.”

I frowned. “A plow horse? What about the race?” I asked, not understanding the meaning of this turn of events.

“The twenty church-horses rounded the final turn, heading for the homestretch, but they all had to pull up. The track was destroyed. The pastor-jockeys dismounted from their church-horses and just stood there. Each could see the finish line a few hundred yards ahead, but they could no longer continue their quest to win the race. It was over for them.”

A question tumbled out of my mouth. “What’d the crowd do?”

Eddy rubbed his chin as he searched for the right words. “The color-groups stood in shock, not saying a word. Nobody moved. Then, a ragtag group of people walked of the grandstands. None of these people wore colored hats or sport coats. They ran out to the track and bowed down by the plowed ground, raising their arms toward heaven. It was as if they had known the plow horse was coming and rejoiced to see it at last.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But wait, there’s more,” he said. “At first, a trickle of people in the color-groups threw away their hats or sport coats and walked down to the track, joining the people on the track. They, too, bowed down and raised their hands. Then, the trickle became a river. And finally, it was a flood. There were no more color-groups. All had removed their hats and sport coats, joining the others on the track.”

I bit my tongue and kept quiet. What could I say?

“Then, everything went dark in my dream, like the lights had been turned off or something. And it was perfectly quiet. Not a sound at all. My heart was pounding in my chest as I expected an encore or something.”

“What? What was it?”

Tears dribbled down his face. “She was beautiful, absolutely gorgeous,” he said.

I studied Eddy for a moment. What is this, I thought, probably some of that charismatic emotionalism. Then, I weakened, “Who was she?”

“Oh yes, I forgot to mention that, didn’t I?” Then, his dribble of tears accelerated into a torrent. He dropped his head into his hands and openly sobbed. Customers from nearby tables stared at him, wondering what was going on. I was embarrassed and reached over, trying to comfort him with a pat on his arm.

“Get a grip on yourself,” I whispered. “People are watching.”

He shook his head. “Man, I don’t care what others think. I don’t care. What I saw was real.” Then, he slowly raised his head without bothering to wipe the tears from his face. The droplets glistened like diamonds as they dropped onto his shirt.

“I saw the Bride of Christ. The Church. She was more beautiful than Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, or any other woman in the history of the world. Her white dress had no spot or wrinkle. It was glorious. Then, I heard a voice say, ‘The coming reformation will destroy the Great American Church Derby by plowing up fallow ground which has been trampled under for hundreds of years. Unity will swallow up disunity; and the priesthood of the believers will be come forth.’ That was the end of the dream.”

He reached for a napkin and wiped his face with it. “So, what do you think?” he whispered.

I was tongue tied, but I needed to say something. “Before I answer, what are you planning on doing with this dream of yours?”

“Frank,” he said with a passion that echoed in my ears, “I have to tell everyone. She was so beautiful – so beautiful and alive. My heart burns to see the American Church become like her. Now I understand why Jesus aches for His Bride; she’s gorgeous. I will go anywhere and do anything to bring it about. I must!”

I looked at my friend a beat before replying. Every residue of teaching in my memory system wanted to reject his dream. Every particle of my flesh desired to snub it. Then, I spoke the words which I never thought I would ever say in my life to a tongue-talking charismatic.

“Brother, I believe your dream. How may I help you?”