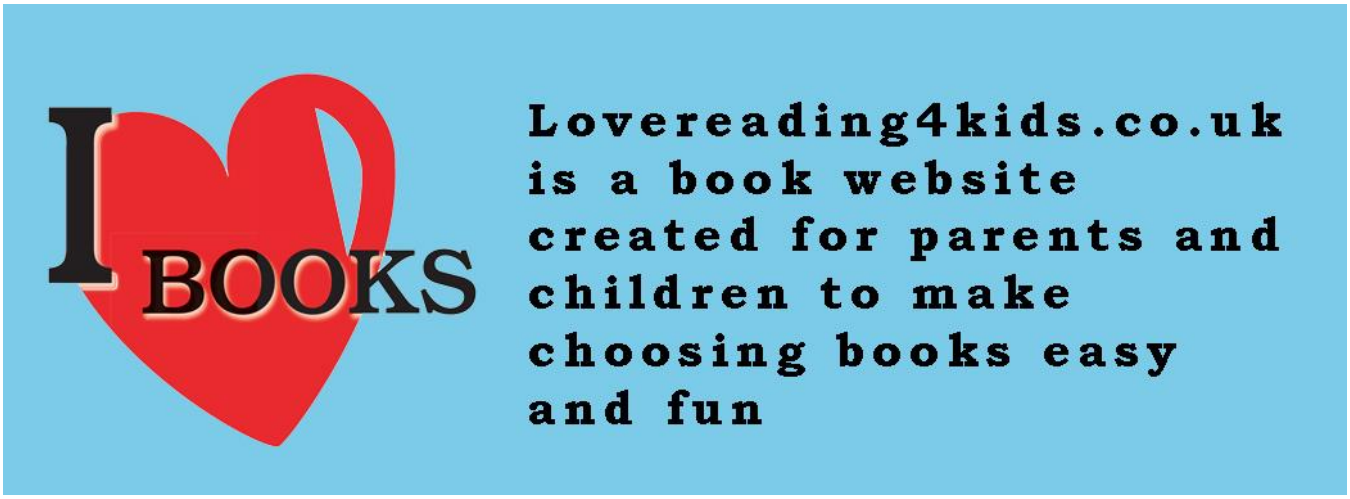



Opening extract from

# Racing Manhattan

Written by

**Terence Blacker**

Published by

**Andersen Press**

**All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator**

Please print off and read at your leisure.



First published in 2016 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Terence Blacker to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Terence Blacker, 2016

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 401 4




Typeset in DIN by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

# Dress-down Friday

A tall, grey-haired man in a heavy sheepskin coat is standing on the edge of his lawn. Beyond him there are fields, leading down into a wood. Now and then he puffs at a cigar in his hand.

My uncle. Bill Barton. Uncle Bill.

I watch him for a moment, a hay-net over my shoulders, as I stand by his gold and black horsebox. The two ponies in the lorry are going racing today. There are three more ponies, and a horse belonging to Uncle Bill's wife Elaine, in a row of stables beyond.

I can hear, above the early morning birdsong, the sound of Uncle Bill's groom Ted as he mucks out one of the stables.

Across a gravel yard stands Uncle Bill's big modern house, Coddington Hall. An old, historic building with that name used to be here but, shortly after my uncle bought it, a fire just accidentally happened to break out in the kitchen and the place burnt to the ground.

'Every cloud has a silver lining,' Uncle Bill says now when he talks about it. 'Collected the insurance. Built a new house. Modern. Great facilities. Games room. More my style. Bish bosh done.'

That's Uncle Bill's way. He is a determined man. Things don't

stand in his way for long. If someone disagrees with him, he gives them the look. There's something about Uncle Bill's look that persuades people to change their mind.

He turns, zipping himself up (that's what he was doing there, like a big silver fox marking his territory). I hurriedly put the hay-net in the back of the horsebox.

A few moments later, Michaela – Uncle Bill's daughter, my cousin and my most-of-the-time best friend – ambles from the house towards the horsebox. She looks amazing. Breeches. Shining boots. Silks in Uncle Bill's black and gold colours. She could be a real jockey, except in miniature and with long blonde hair.

She checks her reflection in one of the wing mirrors.

'Looking good, M,' I say.

'Cheers, Jay.' She smiles, then notices what I'm wearing. Trainers. Jeans. Faded black T-shirt. The crash-hat on my head has a moth-eaten velvet covering and an old-fashioned peak. It looks like something out of *The Antiques Roadshow*.

'I could have lent you some stuff,' she says, frowning.

'No, it's fine. I'm comfortable.'

Michaela does an odd little pouty thing with her mouth, a gesture she has picked up recently at her new school.

'*Comfortable?*' she murmurs. 'What's comfort got to do with it?'

Now Uncle Bill is by the horsebox. A proud-dad smile appears on his face when he looks at Michaela. It vanishes when he catches sight of me.

'Blimey, girl,' he says in that rasping voice of his. 'Dress-down Friday, is it?'

'I had to get the ponies ready, Uncle Bill.'

He swears quietly and gets into the car.

I take one last look in the back of the horsebox.

*Hey, boys. Everything all right here?*

Marius is looking restless. Dusty munches sleepily at his hay-net.

*That's the way, Dusty.*

Uncle Bill toots impatiently at the horn.

I close the horsebox door. A movement in one of the house's upstairs windows catches my eye. My aunt Elaine stands there in a silk dressing gown, her hands around a mug of tea. She is Uncle Bill's second wife, Michaela's stepmother, and is not exactly keen on the idea of our going racing. I wave goodbye to her. She looks away.

I step into the cab, which is already thick with cigar smoke.

Uncle Bill looks across at us, grinning. 'Ready for the races, girls?'

'Races, yay.' Michaela punches the air. 'I'm so excited.'

'You've double-checked everything's in the back, Jay?' he asks, putting the horsebox into gear.

'Yes, Uncle Bill.'

Bish.

Bosh.

Done.

# A PONY ON THE NOSE

We drive for an hour or so. Beside me, Michaela chatters about the ponies, about school, about her friends. I can tell she's nervous.

My mind is fixed on the race ahead. I've been around Uncle Bill long enough to know that whatever he is planning, there will probably be something dodgy about it. He calls it 'working the system'.

I turn towards him. 'Tell us about the races, Uncle Bill,' I say.

He draws on his fat cigar and exhales. Gasping, Michaela puts her head out of the window.

'It's mainly a bit of fun,' he says. 'With a little betting on the side to make it interesting for the grown-ups.'

Here's a tip about my uncle. To get at the truth, you sometimes need to listen very carefully to what he says and then turn it upside-down. Or inside-out. Or back-to-front. Anything but the way he's told it.

These pony races, I'm now guessing, are mainly about betting. With a little fun on the side to make it interesting for the kids.

We bump down a long track until we reach a closed gate. Two men in combat jackets and dark glasses are standing in

front of it. There is something about their body language which is not exactly welcoming. As we approach, they see who is driving and quickly stand back to open the gate.

A big, open field stretches before us.

'Where are we?' Michaela sounds a bit scared.

'This was once an air station,' says Uncle Bill. 'Now it's just derelict land. All sorts of naughty stuff goes on here. Raves. Hare coursing. The odd bare-knuckle fight.'

'*Bare-knuckle fight?*' I look to see whether he's joking. He isn't. 'What about the police, Uncle Bill?'

He gives a little between-you-and-me laugh. 'They don't seem to bother with this for some reason.' He winks at me. 'It's a sort of no-man's-land, law-wise.'

'Oh, right. I see.' (I don't but, with Uncle Bill, it's best not to ask too many questions.)

A few hundred metres away, there is a strip of old road where horseboxes, trailers and vans are parked. This is different from the gymkhanas Michaela and I have been to in the past. No tents. No ring surrounded by straw bales, no jolly picnics, no man with a posh voice making announcements, no proud parents leading small ponies with plaited manes.

Round the outside of the field I can see poles and a white tape. The racetrack.

'Looks a bit serious,' Michaela murmurs to me.

'It does.' I smile to myself.

I feel like I've come home.

* * *

I get into the horsebox to check the ponies. Marius, a light chestnut Arab gelding, is trembling with excitement while Dusty – dark bay, hairy-heeled, big-bummed (my favourite pony in the world) – shows no sign of waking up.

You can probably guess which one I'm riding.

From the outside, Uncle Bills calls out, 'Let's walk the course, jockeys.'

He strides towards the white tape. As the three of us follow the track around the field, he points out to Michaela where the good ground is. He tells her that our race is longer than most, that she must wait to make her move. Marius has a turn of foot – he can beat any pony for speed at the finish – but he gets bored when he's in front.

I listen. Sometimes it can be useful, not being noticed.

There are three races before ours. Michaela stays at the horsebox with Marius. I watch the bigger ponies carefully. Most of the kid jockeys are going too fast too soon. They have forgotten that it has rained during the week. The track is narrow in places and already the ground is muddier. With every race, the final bend is looking more and more like a ploughed field in a thunderstorm.

Where the cars are parked, money is changing hands, and there seems to be quite a lot of drinking going on too. This isn't playtime, that's for sure. It's serious.

I like that.

When we get Marius out of the horsebox and saddle him up, one or two of the gamblers come over to look at him.

'What race is he in, mate?' one calls out to Bill.

'The fourth.'

'Worth a pony on the nose, is he?'

Uncle Bill is tightening the girth. He ignores them.

'What's a pony, Dad?' asks Michaela.

'Just a little bet, love – twenty-five quid,' says the man watching us. 'What d'you say, pal?' He calls out more loudly to Uncle Bill. 'Worth a tickle, is he?'

'Save your money, mate,' says Uncle Bill. 'He's got no chance.'

The men lose interest, and wander off.

'He might win, Dad,' mutters Michaela. 'You never know.'

'Might?' Uncle Bill laughs. 'Will, more like.'

'So why did you say he had no chance?'

There is a tight little smile on Uncle Bill's face, and suddenly I understand his plan.

'The fewer people who bet on you, the better your odds will be at the bookmakers,' I say. 'So, if you win, anyone who has bet on you makes more money.'

'Never mind all that.' Uncle Bill gives Michaela the leg-up, and, as she puts her feet in the stirrups, Marius looks about him with a slightly superior air. Horse and jockey look magnificent.

'Jog him about a bit, love,' Uncle Bill says to Michaela. 'Warm him up.' He watches her go, then turns to me. 'You know too much, girl,' he mutters.

Smiling, I go to fetch Dusty. He looks about him, taking an interest in his surroundings at last. Uncle Bill slips the

bridle over his head and I saddle him up, talking to him all the while.

*This is your day, boy. You're the one nobody thinks will win. We've got a little surprise for them, haven't we?*

Dusty nuzzles me. A stranger might think he's after a sugar lump. I know it's because he's listening to me.

As Uncle Bill takes the reins and holds his head, I brush some straw out of his thick tail with a dandy brush, then run a hand down his flank behind the saddle. Half-Connemara and half-thoroughbred, he is no looker, but he is faster than he looks.

'Beauty is as beauty does,' Ted likes to say.

I jump onto Dusty's back and put my feet in the stirrups.

*Looks aren't everything, are they, boy?*

Uncle Bill shakes his head. 'You and that pony – you're as daft as each other,' he says.

*Ignore him, Dusty. He doesn't know you like I know you.*

'Listen up, kid.' Uncle Bill speaks in a low casual voice as he checks my girth is tight enough. 'You keep out of Michaela's way, right? If she's coming up on the inside, let her through. Do not take her ground. Just don't get in her way. Understood? Be a good girl. Today's Marius's day.'

'You want me to lose?'

'I want Michaela to win.' He gives one of his trademark winks.

I feel a familiar lurch of rage within me. It is like a match being put to petrol.