“The Jockey,” A Short Story by Carson McCullers

The jockey came to the doorway of the dining room, then after a moment stepped to one side and stood motionless, with his back to the wall. The room was crowded, as this was the third day of the season and all the hotels in the town were full. In the dining room bouquets of August roses scattered their petals on the white table linen and from the adjoining bar came a warm, drunken wash of voices. The jockey waited with his back to the wall and scrutinized the room with pinched, crêpy eyes. He examined the room until at last his eyes reached a table in a corner diagonally across from him, at which three men were sitting. As he watched, the jockey raised his chin and tilted his head back to one side, his dwarfed body grew rigid, and his hands stiffened so that the fingers curled inward like gray claws. Tense against the wall of the dining room, he watched and waited in this way.

He was wearing a suit of green Chinese silk that evening, tailored precisely and the size of a costume outfit for a child. The shirt was yellow, the tie striped with pastel colors. He had no hat with him and wore his hair brushed down in a stiff, wet bang on his forehead. His face was drawn, ageless, and gray. There were shadowed hollows at his temples and his mouth was set in a wiry smile. After a time he was aware that he had been seen by one of the three men he had been watching. But the jockey did not nod; he only raised his chin still higher and hooked the thumb of his tense hand in the pocket of his coat.

The three men at the corner table were a trainer, a bookie, and a rich man. The trainer was Sylvester — a large, loosely built fellow with a flushed nose and slow blue eyes. The bookie was Simmons. The rich man was the owner of a horse named Seltzer, which the jockey had ridden that afternoon. The three of them drank whiskey with soda, and a white-coated waiter had just brought on the main course of the dinner.

It was Sylvester who first saw the jockey. He looked away quickly, put down his whiskey glass, and nervously mashed the tip of his red nose with his thumb. “It’s Bitsy Barlow,” he said. “Standing over there across the room. Just watching us.”

“Oh, the jockey,” said the rich man. He was facing the wall and he half turned his head to look behind him. “Ask him over.”

“God no,” Sylvester said.
“He’s crazy,” Simmons said. The bookie’s voice was flat and without inflection. He had the face of a born gambler, carefully adjusted, the expression a permanent deadlock between fear and greed.

“Well, I wouldn’t call him that exactly,” said Sylvester. “I’ve known him a long time. He was O.K. until about six months ago. But if he goes on like this, I can’t see him lasting another year. I just can’t.”

“It was what happened in Miami,” said Simmons.

“What?” asked the rich man.

Sylvester glanced across the room at the jockey and wet the corner of his mouth with his red, fleshy tongue. “A accident. A kid got hurt on the track. Broke a leg and a hip. He was a particular pal of Bitsy’s. A Irish kid. Not a bad rider, either.”

“That’s a pity,” said the rich man.

“Yeah. They were particular friends,” Sylvester said. “You would always find him up in Bitsy’s hotel room. They would be playing rummy or else lying on the floor reading the sports page together.”

“Well, those things happen,” said the rich man.

Simmons cut into his beefsteak. He held his fork prongs downward on the plate and carefully piled on mushrooms with the blade of his knife. “He’s crazy,” he repeated. “He gives me the creeps.”

All the tables in the dining room were occupied. There was a party at the banquet table in the center, and green-white August moths had found their way in from the night and fluttered about the clear candle flames. Two girls wearing flannel slacks and blazers walked arm in arm across the room into the bar. From the main street outside came the echoes of holiday hysteria.

“They claim that in August Saratoga is the wealthiest town per capita in the world.” Sylvester turned to the rich man. “What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said the rich man. “It may very well be so.”

Daintily, Simmons wiped his greasy mouth with the tip of his forefinger. “How about Hollywood? And Wall Street –”

“Wait,” said Sylvester. “He’s decided to come over here.”

The jockey had left the wall and was approaching the table in the corner. He walked with a prim strut, swinging out his legs in a half-circle with each step, his heels biting smartly into the red velvet carpet on the floor. On the way over he brushed against the elbow of a fat woman in white satin at the banquet table; he stepped back and bowed with dandified courtesy, his eyes quite closed. When he had crossed the room he drew up a chair and sat at a corner of the table, between Sylvester and the rich man, without a nod of greeting or a change in his set, gray face.
“Had dinner?” Sylvester asked.

“Some people might call it that.” The jockey’s voice was high, bitter, clear.

Sylvester put his knife and fork down carefully on his plate. The rich man shifted his position, turning sidewise in his chair and crossing his legs. He was dressed in twill riding pants, unpolished boots, and a shabby brown jacket — this was his outfit day and night in the racing season, although he was never seen on a horse. Simmons went on with his dinner.

“Like a spot of seltzer water?” asked Sylvester. “Or something like that?”

The jockey didn’t answer. He drew a gold cigarette case from his pocket and snapped it open. Inside were a few cigarettes and a tiny gold penknife. He used the knife to cut a cigarette in half. When he had lighted his smoke he held up his hand to a waiter passing by the table. “Kentucky bourbon, please.”

“Now, listen, Kid,” said Sylvester.

“Don’t Kid me.”

“Be reasonable. You know you got to behave reasonable.”

The jockey drew up the left corner of his mouth in a stiff jeer. His eyes lowered to the food spread out on the table, but instantly he looked up again. Before the rich man was a fish casserole, baked in a cream sauce and garnished with parsley. Sylvester had ordered eggs Benedict. There was asparagus, fresh buttered corn, and a side dish of wet black olives. A plate of French-fried potatoes was in the corner of the table before the jockey. He didn’t look at the food again, but kept his pinched eyes on the center piece of full-blown lavender roses. “I don’t suppose you remember a certain person by the name of McGuire,” he said.

“Now, listen,” said Sylvester.

The waiter brought the whiskey, and the jockey sat fondling the glass with his small, strong, callused hands. On his wrist was a gold link bracelet that clinked against the table edge. After turning the glass between his palms, the jockey suddenly drank the whiskey neat in two hard swallows. He set down the glass sharply. “No, I don’t suppose your memory is that long and extensive,” he said.

“Sure enough, Bitsy,” said Sylvester. “What makes you act like this? You hear from the kid today?”

“I received a letter,” the jockey said. “The certain person we were speaking about was taken out from the cast on Wednesday. One leg is two inches shorter than the other one. That’s all.”

Sylvester clucked his tongue and shook his head. “I realize how you feel.”
“Do you?” The jockey was looking at the dishes on the table. His gaze passed from the fish casserole to the corn, and finally fixed on the plate of fried potatoes. His face tightened and quickly he looked up again. A rose shattered and he picked up one of the petals, bruised it between his thumb and forefinger, and put it in his mouth.

“Well, those things happen,” said the rich man.

The trainer and the bookie had finished eating, but there was food left on the serving dishes before their plates. The rich man dipped his buttery fingers in his water glass and wiped them with his napkin.

“Well,” said the jockey. “Doesn’t somebody want me to pass them something? Or maybe perhaps you desire to re-order. Another hunk of beefsteak, gentlemen, or –”

“Please,” said Sylvester. “Be reasonable. Why don’t you go on upstairs?”

“Yes, why don’t I?” the jockey said.

His prim voice had risen higher and there was about it the sharp whine of hysteria.

“Why don’t I go up to my god-damn room and walk around and write some letters and go to bed like a good boy? Why don’t I just –” He pushed his chair back and got up. “Oh, foo,” he said. “Foo to you. I want a drink.”

“All I can say is it’s your funeral,” said Sylvester. “You know what it does to you. You know well enough.”

The jockey crossed the dining room and went into the bar. He ordered a Manhattan, and Sylvester watched him stand with his heels pressed tight together, his body hard as a lead soldier’s, holding his little finger out from the cocktail glass and sipping the drink slowly.

“He’s crazy,” said Simmons. “Like I said.”

Sylvester turned to the rich man. “If he eats a lamb chop, you can see the shape of it in his stomach a hour afterward. He can’t sweat things out of him any more. He’s a hundred and twelve and a half. He’s gained three pounds since we left Miami.”

“A jockey shouldn’t drink,” said the rich man.

“The food don’t satisfy him like it used to and he can’t sweat it out. If he eats a lamb chop, you can watch it tooching out in his stomach and it don’t go down.”

The jockey finished his Manhattan. He swallowed, crushed the cherry in the bottom of the glass with his thumb, then pushed the glass away from him. The two girls in blazers were standing at his left, their faces turned toward each other, and at the other end of the bar two touts had started an argument about which was the highest mountain in the world. Everyone was with somebody else; there was no other person drinking alone that night. The jockey paid with a brand-new fifty-dollar bill and didn’t count the change.
He walked back to the dining room and to the table at which the three men were sitting, but he did not sit down. “No, I wouldn’t presume to think your memory is that extensive,” he said. He was so small that the edge of the table top reached almost to his belt, and when he gripped the corner with his wiry hands he didn’t have to stoop. “No, you’re too busy gobbling up dinners in dining rooms. You’re too –”

“Honestly,” begged Sylvester. “You got to behave reasonable.”

“Reasonable! Reasonable!” The jockey’s gray face quivered, then set in a mean, frozen grin. He shook the table so that the plates rattled, and for a moment it seemed that he would push it over. But suddenly he stopped. His hand reached out toward the plate nearest to him and deliberately he put a few of the French-fried potatoes in his mouth. He chewed slowly, his upper lip raised, then he turned and spat out the pulpy mouthful on the smooth red carpet which covered the floor. “Libertines,” he said, and his voice was thin and broken. He rolled the word in his mouth, as though it had a flavor and a substance that gratified him. “You libertines,” he said again, and turned and walked with his rigid swagger out of the dining room.

Sylvester shrugged one of his loose, heavy shoulders. The rich man sopped up some water that had been spilled on the tablecloth, and they didn’t speak until the waiter came to clear away.
The point is this: If a horse race is a metaphor for life, there are those of us who have to ride the horse and those who own and train the horse. This short story is a sad commentary of the little guy whose bitterness over a fellow jockey’s misfortune leads him to reevaluate his role in life and turn on those who throw him scraps to “ride along.”

Is this the entire story?

I also think there’s symbolism at the end: The trainer, rich man, and bookie can’t (or aren’t willing) to clean up a mess or fix things on their own; they have to wait for someone else to do it. And they fact that the jockey calls them libertines means, I think, that he feels they have no morals.

Wonderful story – Exploitation. Life – the richer, smarter, more beautiful, over the weak.

Carson McCullers writes about frustrated or unrequited love, people who have trouble connecting with others – “lonely hunters” if you will. The Jockey is isolated by his stature, and now by the loss of his friend. His resentment at both causes him to act out.
