



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

September 25, 2020

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

“You know that thing where they put concrete in your boots and then throw you in the water?” I said.

“I assume you sink?” Jeremy said.

“Presumably,” I said.

“You’re not going to talk to me about my drinking again, are you?” Jeremy said.

“No,” I said. “I’m talking about my family.”

“Thank God,” Jeremy said. “So, what are they, in the metaphor: the water or the concrete?”

“Both,” I said. “You know that Rihanna song about work?”

“The one that goes work work work work work?”

“Yeah,” I said. “that one.”

“I hate that song,” Jeremy said. “I’m glad I don’t have a family. Been there, done that. You know what I mean?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“You should come with me to Golden Gate Fields today. It’s Wednesday. Let down your hair.”

Golden Gate Fields is a horse track on the outskirts of Richmond. Jeremy and I used to go there frequently as part of our program of misspent youth. We met there to exchange merchandise, made friends we would have been better off without, gambled away the money we earned at our demoralizing jobs. Jeremy shot himself in the foot with a pellet gun in the parking lot and proposed to a woman named Hilda who he met in the bathroom. I broke into a stranger’s car to take a nap and woke up in Nevada. Even when we were young – which was long, long ago – we couldn’t believe the track was still allowed to exist. Going there felt like eating barbecued dinosaur.

“I don’t have any hair,” I said.

“Exactly,” Jeremy said. “Look at you, the life you’ve lived. I’ll pick you up in fifteen minutes.”

“No,” I said.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ve got a secret weapon. It’s like the kryptonite of gambling.”

“Are we betting against Superman?” I said. “Because that doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

“Trust me,” Jeremy said.

“I don’t trust you,” I said. “I the-opposite-of-trust you. Whatever that is.”

“It’s mistrust,” Jeremy said. “Stop complicating things. I’ll pick you up in fourteen minutes.”

“No,” I said, “please. Please don’t pick me up.”

Then I hung up and went and got my yellow shirt on and my hat with the pheasant feather in it and my flick knife with the mermaid carved into the scales and my gold money clip that I won at a dog race in Mexico and went out and stood in the driveway. My daughter, Frances, came out while I was standing there.

“Good morning, Daddy,” she said.

“Go back inside,” I said.

She came down off the steps and walked out in the driveway and stood a few feet in front of me, checking out my clothes.



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

“You look nice,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said.

“What’s the special occasion? You going to the track?”

“Track?” I said. “What track?”

“Is Uncle Jeremy going, too?”

“Jeremy?” I said. “Are you kidding? I hate that guy. I mistrust him.”

Jeremy pulled into the parking lot and beeped the horn. You remember the car brand Datsun? Remember the station wagon they made? He was driving one of those. Green with patches of brown.

“Hi, Uncle Jeremy!” Frances called.

“Heya, sweetheart,” Jeremy called. “You ready to play the ponies?”

“Stop it,” I said to Jeremy. “Go back inside,” I said to my daughter.

“Bye, Daddy,” my daughter said. “Don’t lose too much money.”

“This thing sounds like a donkey with a hangover” I said, when we had gotten out on the road. “What happened to the Mercedes?”

“It was a thorn in my side,” Jeremy said. “This is James.”

He motioned toward the backseat. I looked and didn’t see anything. Then, I noticed an adorable little rabbit. It was just sitting on the seat, wiggling its nose. No seatbelt or anything. I don’t know if it was a baby or what. It was tiny.

“You referring to the rabbit?” I said.

“Correct,” Jeremy said. “Say hello to James.”

“Hello, James,” I said.

James moved his nose.

“You should shake his hand,” Jeremy said. “You don’t want to piss him off.”

“Does he bite?” I said.

“No,” Jeremy said, “he’s a luck rabbit.”

“Right,” I said.

“I won him last night in a hand of poker.”

“If the other guy had the rabbit, how were you able to win the game or whatever?”

“First of all, it was a lady.”

“Apologies,” I said.

“And I never said James was infallible. I just said he was lucky.”

“Are you sure he works?” I said.

“Why wouldn’t he work?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “he just seems a little small. Like maybe he’s got some growing to do.”

“Size is not a determining factor in luck rabbits.”



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

“Ok,” I said. I looked back at James.

“It’s irrelevant. I’m telling you,” Jeremy said.

“I accept that,” I said.

“So, shake his hand.”

I squirmed around and took James’s paw and gave it a little shake.

“How do you feel?” Jeremy said. “Do you feel lucky?”

“Maybe,” I said. “What does it feel like?”

Jeremy parked out at the far end of the lot, near a line of riprap that bordered the water. It was the San Francisco Bay. Looking across it, you could see the Golden Gate Bridge and the spires of the city of San Francisco, rising from the flanks of her blessed hills, like a storybook version of itself, like the lover you wished you never met: a thing that looks like heaven from a distance, but upon further investigation, turns out to be an expensive pain in the ass.

Jeremy went around to the back and opened the door and picked up James and put him in the pocket of his suit coat.

“Is he going to be alright in there?” I said. “Can he breathe?”

“He’s happy as a clam,” Jeremy said. “It’s his element.”

We paid and got our programs and walked through the gates and the squalor of the lower level of the building and out to the grandstands that overlooked the track and the infield and the hills covered in eucalyptus trees and crappy little houses. Jeremy took James out of his pocket and James sat on his knee and looked out at the track and moved his nose. It was early, yet. The track was being groomed and the horses and jockeys were down in the paddock, bustling around among the little wooden buildings, putting on their last bits of color and tack. It was a beautiful scene, beautiful painterly sky, the whole deal.

There are now forty million people in the state of California. It’s a different place than it was in 1941, when Golden Gate Fields was built. The population of this state was 7 million, then. This was just a patch of mud on the edge of nowhere. Like everything else in this state, it was endowed with a beauty we took for granted. My childhood was that same way: beauty was everywhere we looked. We swam in it and drank it and gave it away for free. We canned it and cut it up for shingles. We built racetracks on the shores of San Francisco Bay.

Golden Gate Fields looked like a mistake. Not a small mistake, the kind that can be moved on from in the pursuit of eventual success, but the kind of mistake that stands in the way of success and needs to be erased in order for it to occur. And we, the patrons – me and Jeremy and the other few dozen sacks of crap kicking around the grandstand – recognized ourselves in its fate: history and the wrecking ball were on the way. We all knew that, and it was what drew us together in this place to engage in a collective act of self-destruction. It made us sad and dejected, it crippled us with loathing, but it made us grateful to be alive, too, because, unlike everyday fools, we had come to terms with the error of our existence and the nearness of its end.

The PA system crackled and played William Tell on the bugle and the horses and jockeys walked out of the



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

paddock and down along the edge of the track, beneath the grandstand. Jeremy and James and I walked down to the railing to look at them. There was a little kid about six bodies to my left and his face was stuck out between the bars of railing, craned out to get a look at the horses. I wanted to ignore him, to drink beer and save my pity for myself instead of wasting it on him, but I couldn't. I kept scanning the crowd, wondering who he was there with.

Jeremy got out his program and took the pen from behind his ear and licked it and began making marks on it.

"What do you think of Tomorrow's Promise?" Jeremy said.

"What?" I said.

"As the name for a horse," he said.

"Meh," I said.

"Midnight Moonlight?"

"Meh," I said.

"Red's Rover? Goldie's Gift? Bankshot? Thin Tim's Slim Win?"

"Meh," I said.

"Bleeding Sword?"

"There's a horse named Bleeding Sword?" I said

"Twenty seven-to-one," Jeremy said. "That's him there, in the green and silver."

I looked out at the track, where the horses were now mustering behind the starting gate. I picked out Bleeding Sword. I have spent the equivalent of a young life at racetracks, and yet I cannot tell anything about a horse by looking at it. They all look nice to me. They all look fast.

"I like a long shot," I said. "This is gambling. Not investing."

"If I wanted a job, I'd shave," Jeremy said.

"Exactly," I said.

I held out the program and Jeremy took James's paw and touched it to Bleeding Sword's name, then handed James to me and went up the stairs and into the building to place our bet. I held James up to my face and touched my nose to his.

"Who's a good boy?" I said. "Who's a lucky rabbit?"

I was talking to him in baby talk. I couldn't help it. He was so Goddamn cute, this rabbit. If you saw him, you'd understand.

"Hey," this voice said, "what kind of rabbit is that?"

I looked up from James to see the little kid standing there.

"A small one," I said.

"He looks like a Jersey Wooly," the kid said.

"Right," I said. "A Wooly Bully. His name is James."



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

“Can I hold him?” the kid said.

I looked back up towards the grandstand.

“Well,” I said, “he doesn’t technically belong to me.”

“Just for a second,” the kid said.

I know what you’re thinking: you’re thinking that I gave James to the kid and that he disappeared into the crowd with him and we never saw James again and Jeremy and I, as a result of losing our luck rabbit, lived out our days in a residential hotel on 14th Street, eating soup out of a can and playing checkers on the roof. That’s not what happened.

I handed James to the kid and the kid took him and held him at eye level and examined him.

“Well,” I said, “what do you think?”

“Definitely a Jersey,” the kid said. “Definitely a juvenile, too.”

“Say,” I said, “are you here with somebody?”

“My dad,” the kid said, not taking his eyes off the rabbit.

“Where’s he?” I said.

“He only bets a few races a day here. He’s upstairs in the off-track lounge.”

“Oh,” I said.

What I try to tell myself is that we all have a story – me, you, this kid’s father. We don’t know how a person ends up in their life. It’s not our place to sit in judgement. That’s what I tell myself, but it’s not actually how I live. I am, in fact, a very judgmental person.

The starting bell rang while we were standing there, the kid holding James, me looking down on the track for Bleeding Sword. It wasn’t difficult to find him. He came out from the rest of the horses and went into the first turn on the rail.

Oh God, I thought. *This horse is an idiot. He races the way I would race if I were a horse. He’ll be dead in another hundred yards.*

He wasn’t, though. He didn’t just stay out front, he ran away. Coming into the last turn, he was alone, the nearest horse maybe a dozen lengths back. He could have walked home. But he didn’t, he kept running, running hard, racing against something you couldn’t see. I was screaming by the time he crossed the finish line. I was out of my mind. My whole life made sense. When I came to my senses, the kid was there, holding James.

“What a race, huh?” I said.

“I guess,” the kid said.

We stood there for a moment, looking out at the track.

“Well,” the kid said, “you can have your rabbit back now. He’s a real beauty.”

He held James out to me and I took him back and stroked his head with my thumb. The top of his head felt just the way you would think the top of a little rabbit’s head would feel. Incomparable.

“Who’s a lucky rabbit,” I said. “Who’s a winner?”



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

When I looked up, the kid was walking away.

“Hey,” I said.

“What?” he said.

“Come here,” I said.

I held out James to him.

“I want you to have him,” I said.

The kid looked at me.

“I thought you said he wasn’t yours,” he said.

“You want him or not?” I said.

The kid held out his hands and I gave him James.

“I’m not sure what to say,” he said.

“Don’t say anything,” I said. “Just take care of him. Can you do that?”

“I can do that,” he said.

“Good,” I said.

I watched the kid walk away with James and then I turned and climbed the steps to go back into the building. Jeremy stepped out the door just as I reached it.

“Holy Dooly,” he said, “we’re going to be rich.”

“You gotta take me home,” I said.

“Wait,” Jeremy said. “Where’s James?”

“I gave him to some kid,” I said.

Jeremy didn’t say anything for a second. We’d known each other for a long time. The list of things we’d been through together stretched back into the darkness of our pasts farther than the light of our memories could reach. As he stood there, I could see scenes from those years playing across his eyes.

“Well,” Jeremy said, “You wanna stop for dim sum on the way back? I know this great place at a truck stop north of Petaluma.”

“Sure,” I said, “that sounds good.”

This shipment will be the last for our **2018 Home Chardonnay**. If you’ve ever tasted our Chardonnay, you may already know the answer: no other vineyard can do what this vineyard does. It’s planted in a mixture of volcanic ash and ancient riverbed in a fold of hills that separates the Alexander and Russian River Valleys. It’s one of the coldest vineyard sites in Sonoma County and the character of the wine reflects that fact. The 2018 Home Chardonnay is bracing and lively, full of citrus and green apple and honeydew. It was aged on the lees, in neutral barrels, for about six months, then bottled, without allowing the wine to go through secondary fermentation.

This is the first shipment of our **2018 Alexander Valley Merlot**. We have been making this wine from the



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

same few acres on our Red Winery Vineyard since its maiden vintage, back in 2002. Its hallmark has always been clarity and balance. The 2018 is, as usual, one-hundred-percent varietal. It's Merlot made to taste and smell like Merlot, rather than mild-mannered Cabernet. To me, that means supple tannin, fresh fruit, and a touch of spice. In the 2018, I get a little anise and black pepper. It's a delicate, nuanced wine and our barrel regimen caters to that: the 2018 spent about 18 months in barrel, all French cooperage, only about 20 percent of it new. The hint of oak here exists to highlight the inherent character of the varietal and the vineyard, not to obscure it.

The 2018 is still young. I notice it change in the glass after no more than fifteen minutes. If you're going to drink it now, give it a little time to breathe. If you've got time to wait, give it a few years and it will be considerably broader in aroma and flavor and gentler in texture than it is today. Drink now through 2030.

Our **2016 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet** gets more exciting every time I taste it. What was only a few months ago a tightly-wound, tannic wine that needed air in the glass and age in the bottle, has blossomed into a wine that is generous in aromatics and dark fruit on the palate. The 2016 is a blend of fruit from all three of our estate vineyards, but I taste and smell the heavy influence of the Pyramid here more all the time – I know I just mentioned dark fruit, but again: blackberries, black cherry, a touch of coffee, baking chocolate. Man. A little crème de violette on the nose. This wine will still improve with age, but it makes for a hell of an evening right now. Drink now through 2035.

This is also the final shipment of our **2016 Red Winery Vineyard Cabernet**. Red Winery is never the darkest and most intense Cabernet we produce – its virtues are rooted in elegance and balance – but the 2016 tends toward the darker end of the spectrum. That same cherry character I referenced earlier is here in spades, but it's a darker, sweeter, cherry than in most vintages. I guess that's called black cherry. I love the texture of this wine – it's not silky and easygoing right now, in fact, it's pretty lean and sleek. But all the different components are very well-balanced: the aromatics are a bit candied, a bit floral, a bit spicy. A touch of sweet fruit is balanced by bright acidity and the tannins are firm but even across the palate from beginning to end. All this balance makes the wine a pleasure to drink right now, but perhaps more significantly, it bodes very well for aging. Drink now through 2035.

That's all I got. Stay well and thank you for your support.

– Jake