

The Horse Killer  
Or  
Dazed and Confused in Wellington Florida.

Part one: the escape of the scape goat

My head felt like someone had stuck a railroad spike through it as the sound of metal horse shoes clapped across the concrete outside my door. Eppy Juarez led four horses, like he did two times every morning, past my door and out across the white shale road. There he met Jose Torres and Candy Jo Wilborne who each rode a horse and led four more for their daily exercise across the Everglades Polo complex outside Wellington Florida.

Despite the hangover, there were two other things that were wrong as I tried to orient myself to the new day. Number one was, there was someone laying beside me, and number two, there were three kids next to my bed starring at me with large brown eyes.

The door to my apartment was open, letting the blinding sun into the small efficiency that was built on to the barn.

I shut my eyes and tried to recap the evening, as the base line from the Allman Brothers' *Le Bres in A Minor* thumped across my temples. I was home; that was good. Don't remember how I got here; bad. Rusty Nail the night before, good; guitars, food, fire pit; good; personnel; the Longos, Rick, Sande Texas, Fat Bastard, the Bohnsons, Edna Wilson...oops. Please, dear lord don't tell me I drug Edna Wilson home from the Rusty Nail.

Clear the witnesses! The soft breathing of the three youngsters felt now like welding torches on the side of my face.

"Vamos Ninos!" I rasped, raising up on an elbow which sent them giggling out the door. It translates into go away little people, or something like that. I took a deep breath and rolled over to find a total surprise of a smallish, dark skinned female with her back to me. Now my head began to spin. Don't remember anyone like that from the Rusty Nail. I slipped out from under the sheet and found my sleeping shorts in a ball in the corner which I tried to pull on without falling over. Squinting at the light I pulled the door shut and glanced over at the bed which showed the out line of the sleeping female with her back to me, who I have not yet the recollection of knowing. She looked Latin which meant she probably had a boyfriend nearby, or a brother, and for all I knew, those were her children. Tequilla bottle on the counter; bad. Two shot glasses. Los Lobos CD's on the counter; good. I hit the can. Shower water; good. You know you are in trouble with a hangover when the cold water feels good in the shower.

As the water turned warm, the events of the night were slowly coming back to me. I had put in the day from hell over at Grand Prix Estates floating horses teeth. The horse show is notorious for screw balls, but what I had encountered yesterday, really topped the charts. Joanie Smithers, was your typical Wellington wife; high and tight. Face lift, new boobs and lots of bling. Married a rich guy and figured the first thing she needed to do was to own a horse. Not a horse woman, but after buying a \$250,000 dumb blooded Irish nag that so many agents and trainers had greased their palms on, she was left with about an \$800 bucket o' glue that had more mental issues than Joanie.

The one who took the real bath was Mr. Smithers, but I supposed that Joanie had done things to him pre marriage that made him feel alive. Anyway, I showed up at her barn at the request of her horse trainer who thought that filing the sharp edges off this foreign equestrian jumper might make him stop stampeding out of the show ring on his hind legs.

The problem was, Joanie was late for the appointment and since she told me which stall her horse was in and what it looked like I went ahead and sedated the horse and did its teeth, which were, as it turned out, sharp as nails. The insides of the horse's cheeks were lined with weeping lacerations. Just as I started a dark green Jag pulls in the barnyard and out walks Joanie. Pink pants, loafers with little snaffle bits across the top, gold bracelets. She walked over and looked at her horse. "Did you sedate him?" she asked.

"Yes, I gave him a half dose of Dormo" I responded. We had discussed this over the phone when I asked if the horse was showing in the next three days. I told her the reason, was that the drug needed that much time to dissipate in the horse's system in case her horse was drug tested after the show. Evidently she didn't listen because now Joanie now had her head in a feed tub in the corner of the stall and was hyperventilating. It upset her something horribly to see her baby's bottom lip flopping. "It's ok," I said. "This drug is like a half vicotin and half valium."

"Oh," she said, snapping out of her neurotic panic attack. "That sounds good."

"They must not do teeth in Ireland" I said. Buying a horse for over a hundred grand with sharp teeth is like buying a new car with brakes that pull to the right. Two and a half hours later, after she told me about her affair with the gardener, her husbands affair with some "slut" named Tiqui from Palm Beach, and everything else that had beaten her down over the years, she finally clamed down enough to write me a check. With the life almost completely sucked out of me, I managed to interrupt the dissertation and motion towards her horse. "This should help his mouth," I mentioned referring to the horse's newly smooth teeth.

"What?" Joanie asked as if she had forgotten why I was there. "Would you like a drink?"

"No ma'am, but thank you." Gotta Go.

It was with great relief when I got in my pickup that I saw I had a message telling me to get my ass to the Rusty Nail that night. Jimmy Longo, a friend had built an open air bar on the edge of the sugar cane fields. I had not socialized much since Gayle left me. I know it was their attempt to get me out. I imagine Rick was behind it. As far as friends went, they don't get much better than Rick. He had been one of the most underrated players in the game of polo. Grew up poor and by hook and crook became a polo player but never forgot where he came from. At any rate I gave in and drove across the sugar sand back roads on the edge of the everglades to the Rusty Nail. It had been your usual drunk-a-thon of shots, beer, shrimp, bond fires and music. What I couldn't figure was who the girl in my bed was.

What I had no idea about, was that while I was taking a shower, two television trucks had got through the gate at the end of the lane in search of the Horse Killer. An anonymous tip had informed two networks that the case of the equine herpes virus had taken on a face. Mine. Nine horses, high dollar, polo and equestrian horses, were dead in the worlds most high profile horse complex and someone had figured out that it was

spread by a local horse dentist who had worked on all nine horses. This was breaking news along with the fact that the man, me, would be taken into custody at 7:30 am.

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Clay Rawlins, was about to put his toe in the stirrup to mount a young horse he was training when he saw the media trucks round the corner of the barn. Clay ran the Everglades polo complex for Jonathan Edwards who was based out of Minnesota. Clay grew up in San Antonio and much like Rick, ended up a polo player. Being an old friend of mine he rented a spare apartment in the barn to me.

One reporter looked at a man get out of the other van and announce to no one. "Where are the police?" The other reporter had walked over to my pickup and began to film the bed of the truck. Clay led the horse he was about to climb on, back in the stall and tied the reins to the saddle and shut the stall door. He walked past the woman who probably realized that without the police there, they were trespassing. Clay walked past her to the man who was directing a camera man on the bumper of my pickup to film. "Can I help you people?" he said. The camera man kept filming and the reporter pretty much ignored Clay, like two kids who were grabbing the last few Easter eggs after the whistle had blown ending the hunt. Clay waited and then grabbed the camera man by the back of his shirt. "You need to get out of there. I don't think Todd wants you in the back of his pickup." Just then the woman walked up and asked the other reporter. "Have they arrested him yet?"

Clay looked at her as the reporter and camera man stepped away from the pickup. "Who are you people looking for, and who gave you the code to the gate?" he asked the woman who walked over and ran her hand against the torn fiberglass fender of my pickup. "Todd Richardson, the horse killer. Evidently he's supposed to be arrested here. Did we miss it?"

Clay ignored the question. He knew that whether or not I spread the virus, he knew that this kind of thing could get out of hand, and if it was true that the law was on their way, I would be in deep trouble before the facts were sorted out. Jose, Candie Jo, and Eppy, were out on the exercise track with the horses. "He's out there riding, but you people will have to leave now."

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I learned the rudiments of Equine dentistry twelve years ago from my friend Greg MacCarty while I was breaking horses in WYarno, Wyoming. Then, working as a horse trainer in Texas, a so called Equine Dentist saw me filing the edges off a horse's teeth and asked me if I wanted to make some real money. I did his work for him while he bullshitted the horse owners. Then, when I was done, he collected \$50 a horse, and gave me \$10. Since I was getting \$63 a day to train horses, I thought I was getting rich. I was twenty three then, which was ten years ago, and so much has happened since then, it feels like it never even happened.

The person I was riding horses for in Midland was Bart Evans, the Hall of Fame polo player. By then he was at the height of his game and was about as grumpy as a man could be. I guess that is from a life time of living in the fish tank full of barracudas known as high goal polo. He raised his own horses and had the best string of polo ponies in the sport. I was in no way any super star as a trainer, but the Evans' are the kind of

people that if you show up on time and go the extra mile for them, you have a friend for life. I had had no idea how rare this was, until I shipped off for Florida the next month.

Welcome to Wellington; the swamp that was drained, and turned into a ranch, by Charles Oliver Wellington. His cows were branded with his initials; COW. The brand was improved by his cattle manger to include wings and thus the Flying COW Ranch was born. When the real estate boom came along, the ranch was turned into the village of Wellington. The town was developed to give young families with kids a community where they could escape the retired, kid hating New Yorkers who migrated south to die.

In addition to this, Gould Corporation CEO, William T Ylvsaker, sold some financial backers on a plan to build the world's largest polo club in the swamps of Wellington and named it Palm Beach Polo and Country Club. This was to appease most of the high maintenance wives that the corporate polo players of the north were married to. The wives, most of which could care less about the sport of polo, were thrilled with the idea of accompanying their husbands south to Florida and eating lunch and shopping on Worth Avenue all winter. Of course, Mr. Ylvsaker made sure there were plenty of affordable chalets overlooking the polo fields. Next he coerced Prince Charles to make an official visit with his posse he traveled with during the IRA's hey day. With security, housing, food, and all the drinks the English could stomach, the tab came to about a cool million for Prince Charles to play an exhibition game there but like Guerry Stribbling, one of the founders of Wellington told me, it was worth 25 mil in advertising. It didn't hurt that the club provided free tabs and hookers at the bar for all the media.

Palm Beach Polo was soon known world wide and it provided a world stage for polo. Excess was the name of the game, and players both in and out of the sport flocked to this quiet little town between Thanksgiving and Easter to witness the sport of kings and billionaires playing next to their hired Argentine horsemen.

The Palm Beach VIP'S were lured west twenty miles to Wellington and driven around the Sunday fields in a parade of complimentary white Cadillac's where they were introduced and presented a bouquet of roses in front of the grandstand. Nigerian Princes and Philippine royalty shipped their horses to Wellington, only to get shot or go broke, but not before bringing their own brand of partying to Mr. Wellington's town. It was Palm Beach with boots and spurs, which was enough for Roxanne Pulitzer to get off her trumpet and move west.

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While the shower ran over me I was oblivious to the fact that a well orchestrated plan was materializing, making me the most hated man in America since Michael Vick drowned his own dogs. The media trucks were outside the barn, having been tipped off to cover the arrest of the Horse Killer. In the last three weeks eight horses had died of a mysterious virus. One more was about to join the ranks; Rasputin, the three time Grand Prix champion of Wellington and Olympic champion was at the present, barely dead. Lying in his stall in the show tents, less than a half mile away was a poor beast whose life was a casualty in a scheme of greed.

Right now, in the shower, I am feeling better which I've learned how a tequila hangover works; you start to rally and then bam! The thumping in my head had now morphed into the chorus of Danny O' Keefe's *Good Time Charlie's got the Blues*. Now it was time to face the fire that awaited me. I turned the water off and pulled the beach

towel off the wall. *My friends keep telling me, you're not a kid at 33.* If I only knew what was coming, I might have taken a longer shower, but I pulled my shorts back on and opened the door to see a beautiful young lady sitting naked on the edge of my bed with a sheet partially wrapped around her. Mexican Princess, Brazillian model? Holy south of the border, I have landed the next ex Mrs. Todd Richardson. I was looking at her with the same wonderment that people in some sections of Arkansas look at airplanes, except I made myself keep my mouth shut and not point. I was staring, looking for something, anything. Mexican? Brazillian? She stared back, but with more composure than I had the cool to muster. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I gave it my best James Bond, looked toward the ceiling. "Thank You God" I said, offering a smile but her beauty was such that I was both tongue tied and amazed at my good fortune. She had black mane that fell down on either side of her face that seemed to study me, staring me right in the eye. The little man in the left side of my brain broke me out of my euphoria. Hey James Bond, how about a little hospitality.

"I'm sorry, would you like some water?" I reached back towards the refrigerator and took a plastic water bottle from a case. I cringed. Jesus, help me. A glass... my kingdom for a glass. Truth is, I haven't used a glass in here, ever. Though the glasses in the cupboard were clean, they had been sitting on the shelf in Florida for at least four years. There was a month worth of plastic cups I drank vodka tonics with in the evenings, but they had not been rinsed out. "These coffee cups are clean" I offered, reaching in the cupboard. I spied what might have the source of my memory loss. There was my script of emergency percodans I got when my mare stomped the end of my toe off last spring. The lid was off. That explains why I couldn't feel the full effect of the pain associated with my temples throbbing. I had been saving the pills for emergency's, like toothaches or getting bucked off. Or knowing I was going to be bad hungover in the morning. Anyway I turned towards my guest and just handed her the water bottle. She cocked an eyebrow with a cool look that probably would have made Napoleon invade Russia. Or Marc Anthony drink the Nile. Legs crossed, one foot lightly touching the tile floor, sleepy look, she was gorgeous. When she reached up and took the water a lighting bolt of erotic memory knocked the Danny O' Keefe out of me which morphed into Chris Issak's *Wicked Game*. Moans, hands, sweat, it all came back to me as a shock through my brain. Mongo like candy. All right, game on. I reached for her hand and at the very same instant my door exploded in a fit of pounding."BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

"Todd, open the door!" It was Clay Rawlins. Clay and I went way back, and it was unlike him to pound on anything. I walked over and stuck my head out. He looked rattled. "We got problems. Some people are blaming you for the virus, the news people are out front and the law is on their way. Get some pants on and go. You got about one minute to get out of here." He paused for a long second.

There's two kind of looks a guy will give another in a situation like this. The first is a straight face with a smirk, which translated into a kind of *ha, ha, you're busted*. The other is *sorry man, don't freak on me, I know how important this is to you, but I had to interrupt*. I got the latter. I had been on quite a dry spell since Gayle had run off with a team roper, eight months prior. Truth is, you could add on another six months that she had rejected me before that.

Clay looked sheepish. "I'm sorry, I know there's a girl in there, but I pulled my truck over on this side of the barn; take it to Robert's barn and park out back, I call you." He gave a quick glance over my shoulder. "We'll give the girl a ride."

At any rate I had a lot of information to process in a hurry. My first impression was that this was a joke. Clay was known to pull some major league pranks in his day, but somehow I found his look a little spooky. He wasn't smiling as he tossed me his keys. "I got them believing that Eppy is you, out riding horses, but they'll figure it out in a minute." This was a lot to take in on a hangover. So desecration being the better part of valor, I jumped in my Wranglers pulled the buckle over and stuck it in the last hole, hit my flip flops with both feet, grabbed a Hawaiian shirt off a hanger and jammed my panama straw cowboy hat on as I pulled my stash of cash from under a pile of shirts in the closet and stuffed it in my front jeans pocket. I decided to play it safe and step out my back window; a feat I had performed in reverse often enough when I had locked myself out. I took a long look at the goddess sitting wrapped in what now looked to me like an angels gown. "Uh, I have to go, make yourself at home. Clay will give you a ride home." I grabbed my phone off the bed stand and paused. "Uh, you are the prettiest girl I have ever met in my life. There is a pen on the stand, could you leave me your number; I'd be an honor to take you out to dinner. And would you mind if I took your photo?" I realized that statement could have solicited a variety of reactions, but I got a small smile and she turned to pose. I flipped my phone open and clicked off a quick photo of her sitting there. As I had one leg out the window I felt a hand on my arm pull me back. She stood in all her glory, pulled me close and laid the most passionate kiss on me I'd ever experienced. Well, actually there was the one time when Patty Donner found me passed out on her friends living room floor when I was 19, but that kiss, while passionate, was not what I'd call pleasant. I almost suffocated then, but this was a whole other experience. I heard loud voices outside my door and slid back out the window.

The new white Ford F 350 6.4 diesel, with Evergalde's Polo logo sat along the back side of the barn like the Millennium Falcon. Clay told me it had a computer chip installed and could flat out fly if you needed it. I jumped in and eased it out the driveway as the electronic gates two hundred yards away opened and two sheriff's cars headed in the driveway. This could be a short getaway, but the officers seemed focused more on the barn than who was leaving, so I eased down in the seat and waved as they passed me. Thank goodness for tinted windows. As I eased through the gates onto the paved road I looked right and saw a sheriff's car stopped a quarter mile down the road at the intersection. The deputy was out of the car and talking with two ladies on horses and someone in a SUV. Only one other way out, and that was left through the horse show.

Over eighty circus tents housed over three thousand horses in what is the largest horse show on earth that lasted from November through March. I eased into what I could only describe as a carnival of equestrian confusion; golf carts scooters, tents, horses, ponies and a variety of people wandering in a labyrinth of dirt and wheel barrels. Cars were parked haphazardly along the route with children on ponies, barking Jack Russells, and corgis waddling aimlessly through the dirt. Horses being led or ridden to and fro, bathed. Somewhere is a schooling ring where burnt out riding instructors bark orders to overprivileged girls who sit up straight on their ponies and dream about a java chip frappachinos, and the Jonas Brothers.

I opened my cell phone and checked her photo. Nice. I knew neither her name or where she came from, but I was hoping that she complied with my request to write her phone number down. As I eased Clay's truck through the tents full of horses, I called Rick.

"What up?" came the voice of the other end of the phone.

"I think I'm getting arrested. I just passed two cops going into the barn. Clay loaned me his truck and told me to go out the back. The news team is there and calling me the face of the virus."

"Cool, you gonna turn yourself in?"

"Thanks, I knew I could count on compassion from you."

"I'll call Mac and see what he knows. Mean time you better go to the beach or something." Mac Watson was a sheriff's deputy who was a friend of ours.

"Hey, let me ask you something."

"What?"

"Do you remember there being a super hot, Latin girl at the Rusty Nail last night?"

I heard laughter in the back ground. "Am I on speaker phone?"

"Not anymore," he said as his voice came clear.

"Well, I woke up with one this morning." More muffled laughter.

"Uh, let me call you right back, that's Sande calling. Where you at now?"

"Cutting through the horse show to Pierson Rd."

I could have sworn I heard Sande laughing in the back ground.

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Remmy Ryan, the wife of a long time Chicago politician, was steamed. Her veterinarian, Dr. Jobe Milkins was late. She sped across the north end of the show ground in her Rolls convertible, leaving the officer in the guard shack, and several motorists disheveled. Squealing tires and a cloud of dust brought everything to a halt as she marched into the barn. Her grooms, Jose and Oscar were obediently sitting on a bale of hay looking both afraid and confused. Three stalls down, Mrs. Ryan's three million dollar stallion, Rasputin, was deader than Grover Cleveland.

"Is the vet here yet?" Jose shook his head no.

"That fucking idiot!" she snarled. She punched in number 3 on her speed dial and waited. "Where the fuck are you?" she looked right through her Mexicans as she unloaded on Dr. Milins. The voice on the other end of the line was submissive. He had no chance to explain before she cut him off. "Listen, if you are not here in 5, I will personally nail your balls to your clinic door." She snapped her phone shut and got in her car. She looked at the Mexicans, frozen on the hay bale. "Don't fucking move!" she said, and jumped in her car and sped away. She flipped the phone open again as she sped around the corner of the complex running a groom on a scooter into a ficus bush. She then sideswiped a golf cart which sent it up on two wheels, where the now wide awake Mexican groom was performing a stunt that could have made a Hollywood stuntman jealous. For no other reason than physics, the cart remained balanced rolling along at 15mph tilted perfectly on two wheels until, unfortunately for the groom, physics chose the rollover. The man tried to bail out, but only succeeded in hitting the pavement at and then having the roof of the golf cart smash on top of his legs and drag him another fifteen

feet coming to a screeching halt in front of a white F350 Pickup with, you guessed it, yours truly behind the wheel.

I was easing Clay's company truck through the show grounds until the sight of a terrified Mexican clinging to a steering wheel of a runaway golf cart snapped me from any exhilaration that might have gone with surviving a narrow escape.

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Eppy Juarez was scared. Three squad cars and everyone seemed to be looking at him. He had been apprehended once already in the Miami Airport and shipped back to Mexico. He was back in a week. But there was no way he was going to go through that again. He was about to make a run for it when Clay waved him in. The deputy waited for Eppy to dismount and then approached him. Clay was helping Candy Jo with her horses and watched the deputy approach Eppy. "Watch this," he mumbled to Candy Jo.

"Mr. Richardson," the deputy asked.

Eppy shook his head no. "Alright Mr. Richardson you'll have to come with us. We have some questions about horses you have done the teeth on." Eppy tried his English. "No, es there!" He pointed at Todd's apartment.

"Yeah we have already met your girlfriend." The deputy pointed at the girl who was in Todd's room.

Eppy looked at the beauty standing by one of the deputy's and his jaw fell open. "Aye" he said looking at the girl.

"Who's the girl?" Cande Jo asked Clay.

"It's a long story"

Just as the other three deputies began to encircle Eppy, Clay Rawlins realized he had given Todd Richardson all the head start he could, and stepped forward to help Eppy.

"Eppy, where's Todd?" Clay asked. Eppy shrugged like he didn't know. The officers looked at Clay who realized the kind of trouble he could be in.

"His apartment is over there." Clay looked towards the back of the barn and saw an officer holding the girl. The reporters began to sense something was wrong and descended on the officer who was leading the girl back into the apartment. Suddenly she pulled away and spit at the patrol man whereby the next closest one grabbed her from behind and gave her a shake.

"Where's your boyfriend?" he said.

Cande Jo hit Deputy Dan Morrison's number on speed dial. "Dan we got problems, you need to get over here now!"

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"Two quick shots to the head and we're out of there. They take him into the police station get some film on him and then let him go. He goes back to the barn, and on Wednesday, when both grooms are gone to soccer, that's where we hit him." Mickey Struthers handed Ed Watson his share of the up front money. Ed counted the stacks of hundreds.

"Five grand, not bad."