

Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

It All Depends On Doncaster

by Ivor John

Probably a dozen men, it was always men, only men, sitting on stools or stood leaning on the melamine finished counter which went along the side of the room. A few of them retired, wearing flat caps. Expressionless faces as they fed coins into the machines between races. The others, mostly in work clothing, solid boots and company names on their jackets. The only woman in the place was Jackie, who sat behind the perspex screen at the end of the room. She took the bets and tapped the details into the computer on her desk which was cluttered with betting slips, tied up into bundles with elastic bands, and half empty mugs of cold milky tea. To one side a cloth handbag, with the contents spilling out across the keyboard.

"Shit, shit!" she shouted grabbing up her bag as a puddle of tea from a mug she had knocked over spread across her desk.

"Sorry Pete, I knocked my tea all over the sodding desk."

"I'll have this to place, tax up front Jaq, thanks."

I watched as she unfolded the screwed up slip he had handed her, adjusting her glasses as she tapped in the details.

"Hope it gets there for you Pete, its good odds."

There wasn't generally much conversation, the men silently watching the television screens showing live racing from the courses. He remembered, back in the day, when it would be live from the courses and rooms filled with cigarette smoke. Now it was more likely Sky TV for the football or the Betfred channel.

Chepstow race course came up on the TV, the horses being led to the blocks, shaking and stamping as race officials coaxed them into their places in the line up. The novices hurdle, was the fourth race on his accumulator of five races. He had got Stoke Pero on 50 to one. He had put a tenner on horses he fancied, with long odds. It was a punt, shit or bust really, but his first three had come in on the nose as well. He never tried to add up the hypothetical winnings on a bet in progress, it was considered unlikely.

'Never count your winnings when you're sitting at the table, there'll time enough for counting, when the dealings done' he sang to himself. He reckoned though it must be about three hundred carried onto this race. That would give him around 15 grand on his last horse in the Virgin Handicap at Doncaster.

They were off, he didn't like jumps, too unpredictable, too many chances for a good horse to fall, but Stoke Pero got out well. The jockey in yellow with a red stripe was easy to follow. It was a short race, three furlongs. Into the jumps and she was still there, and into the final bend, and 'oh my god, she's there'. His horse was certainly in the front at the line. A few minutes later confirmed by the steward's announcement, Stoke Pero had won. That was fifteen grand going on to his final horse, Fille D'avignon, fifty to one in the Novices Handicap at Doncaster.

It was forty minutes until his next race, with fifteen thousand pounds riding at fifty to one. That would bring him in around seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds. He thought about that for a moment, about that amount of money. All it needed was for Fille D'avignon to win, like his previous four horses. 'How wonderful to be alive,' he thought, 'but why does it always hurt'.