

# The Bet

---



Steven Rubin

[www.steverubin-writer.com](http://www.steverubin-writer.com)

Elizabeth Durban didn't believe in luck. She'd never been to a racetrack before and stood off to the side of the betting window for fifteen minutes listening to seasoned gamblers and degenerates cut their spiels.

*Yeah, gimme two by ten, the fifth in a tri-box, the four, seven, eight, right, then box the one, seven, nine in a quinella for the sixth.*

When it came her turn she confidently stepped in line, fidgeting with her five dollars, her last five dollars until Friday's paycheck, a full three days away, and bet the number two horse in the fifth to win, two dollars, because she'd watched as the horses were paraded and number two was cute. Also, she liked its name: '*Royal Discretion*'.

She held her ticket tightly in both hands and moved out of the clubhouse and meekly down toward the rail, trying to keep distance between herself and the crowds, aware that despite what she felt was her homely appearance there was always a man or two that would take an interest in her, or take her to bed even if she'd allowed, and around the track with its despair and alcohol there would be more than one or two especially since she was alone.

Her dumb brother David had dared her to go.

"You're twenty-seven years old, Elizabeth," he'd admonished her over lunch at her favorite organic restaurant. "You don't drink. You don't smoke. I'll bet you've never even gambled. Bet? Gamble? Get it?"

"Funny. And I have too, David," she'd plead. "It was a gamble just moving up to New York. To work at the theater."

"Not what I mean," he pretended to enjoy his vegetarian chili, but chili should have meat in it, and lots of it, he felt.

So, just like that the very next week here she was standing at the 'rail' while they loaded the horses into the starting gate. She bet on '*Royal Discretion*' because she liked anything to do with royalty, the '*Crown*'. It was the long-shot of the field, which Elizabeth only partially understood meant that it wasn't likely to have a chance at winning but then she'd only wagered two dollars. One of the '*railbirds*' she believed they were called (which just meant '*degenerate gambler at the track*' in plain English) an older man explained to her that the number two was going off at twenty-five to one and that she could have bet the horse to 'place' or to 'show' which meant that if the horse finished first, second or third she would win some money, just not as much. *She wasn't really at the track to win anything* -she wanted to tell the old man, *-really only to place a bet and then save the chit as proof*. But, she had to admit it was a *little* exciting, her eyes on the

number two horse: *'Royal Discretion'* as she noticed that the massive, glistening animal seemed more calm than most of the other horses and let the jockey walk it right into the starting gate without much fuss. She liked the colors too: purple checkerboard, that the horse and jockey were matched in.

People were smoking everywhere, cigarettes and cigars, and drinking alcohol. It was 1962 and she thought it all, the smoking particularly, was also dumb. Clearly unhealthy, but then so many did it, and nearly everyone at the track it seemed. She thought to keep this particular opinion from her brother lest he insist that she take that up as well; her first and only cigarette was when she was sixteen and her first and only alcohol, a *Pabst* beer, well, part of one, when she turned twenty-one, were equally unpleasant memories. As the horses were almost all in the starting gate she took one last look around, a slow three-sixty. Of the thousands of people who were milling about like drones in a beehive, almost all of them were about to be disappointed, with only a few elated. There would be fifteen minutes break and then the sixth race would wind it all up, and start it all over again.

Near Elizabeth, a tall, thin man who for some reason looked like a cowboy missing his hat stood next to a slightly pudgy lady who wore way too much make-up. Both appeared soused, the lady more so. Elizabeth wondered what their story was as he looked sort of like a guy you might see on TV. The lady with him was nondescript except for her drunkenness which made her seem to totter. They appeared to be a couple of some sort but were not acting affectionate. Just drunk. Although the man had a sharpness to his eyes that contrasted the booze.

Then, there was some subdued commotion, a bell somewhere, and an overhead announcement blared: *And they're off!*

The race began.

It was hard to see what was going on as the horses went around one turn then even further away a second, all twelve horses in a pretty tight bunch. Elizabeth wondered lightheartedly if the jockeys were chatting about dinner and the weather. Then, as she looked across to the other side of the track a few of the horses seemed to be pulling slightly ahead. She saw the number three in the lead with the number eight behind it and then the number seven. Her horse, the number two, she could tell by the purple checkerboard colors, it wasn't in the way back but nearer to that than the front. People started screaming. Louder. Then out of nowhere the two seemed to speed up dramatically and by the time they turned the third corner it was now with the other

three horses that were running faster in a group. The tall, thin man near her was jumping up and down, pumping his fist in the air and cheering as were a lot of people, while the pudgy lady with him was sort of excited too but also looked like she might vomit. *'Royal Discretion'* was running really hard now and as the group came around the last turn Elizabeth felt out of place being so quiet so she screamed: go *'Royal Discretion'!* *Whoo!*—at the top of her lungs and even shook her fist high in the air but no one noticed. Dirt flew from the horses' jack-hammering hooves and she would swear she could feel the ground and maybe even the grandstand shaking. She couldn't really see the number two in the bunch and then almost too quickly the horses were upon her as she stood near the finish line and in a blur she saw purple up near the front and then everyone was screaming, well, some still were. From her periphery she'd noticed the majority had seemingly lost interest before the lead pack of horses came around the final turn. She heard the announcer say in a very drab voice: *Photo finish*—and didn't know what that meant but the tall, thin man and his drunk lady friend were now *both* looking like they might vomit although when Elizabeth briefly caught the thin man's eye he was more stunned than flat-out drunk and she saw that he was shaking and had suddenly moved right next to the lady and seemed ready to embrace her. Elizabeth heard the man mumbling something and watched the couple as they walked back toward the clubhouse, like jittery zombies when the announcer came back on and said: *'Royal Discretion' by a nose in photo-finish, followed by 'Terrence's Pride' to place and 'Wilfred's Cha-Cha' to show. Fifteen minutes 'til start time for the sixth.*

What did 'by the nose' mean? She heard *'Royal Discretion's'* name first- did *'Royal Discretion'* win? Well, this was sort of embarrassing. She moved toward the clubhouse debating whether to place one more bet on the next race so she didn't look like a complete square, and then go home. She had to admit: it *was* kind of exciting. The old man who had been talking to her at the rail before the race walked by her and glanced at her queer, grumbling something about the 'damn two' but she'd already forgotten what number the pretty purple horse had been. She stood near the window and decided to make one more bet, then she'd have the dollar left for something to eat on the way home when she noticed the tall, thin man with the glazed, dizzy stare being led with his drunk lady friend by a security man and wondered if they were being escorted out merely for being too drunk or if there was some other sort of trouble.

Elizabeth got into a line and began to study the names on the board for the sixth race, almost not believing her luck as the number seven was named: *'Princess Bounty'* –

the second reference to royalty, so her mind was set. But, this time she figured to use the term 'show' like the old man had explained so she might look less like a rube. She heard several conversations in a loud buzz, about something called a 'four-thousand dollar trifecta' but didn't know what that meant or why everyone was talking about it. She waited in line then heard the man betting in front of her at the window mention the trifecta again with a whistle and the window gal who normally looked utterly bored even seemed a bit animated. Elizabeth was still holding her first betting ticket in her hand when it was her turn and she said: "I would like to bet on '*Princess's Bounty*'. Please. Third place. Two dollars," she handed the money across.

"Like this," the window lady said patiently, "two on the seven in the sixth, to show. Okay?" Elizabeth nodded but didn't really understand, and didn't really need to as like the liquor and cigarette she was quite sure this would be the last bet she would ever make.

Elizabeth asked: "What does '*by their nose*' mean if you don't mind my asking?"

The counter woman glanced at her quick to be sure she was serious. "Means it edged out in a photo finish. Sometimes even with the photo they end in what's called a dead-heat. Tied. When that happens they split the win."

There was more commotion and Elizabeth turned and watched along with almost everyone there as the tall, thin man and drunk lady were now being escorted through a door marked: *Authorized Personnel*. She couldn't imagine what they'd done.

The window gal saw Elizabeth watching and leaned forward a little as if she couldn't help but gossip. "That man just hit the biggest trifecta in *Belmont* history." Elizabeth wanted to know what that meant and was going to ask when the window gal saw the other chit from the last race, after Elizabeth briefly set it down so she could move the new ticket she'd just purchased to her left hand and pocket the first one for David. The window gal, probably assuming Elizabeth wanted her to throw it away reached out and snatched it and before Elizabeth could politely ask for it back, without looking dumb or irritating the line of people behind her. The woman looked at it and stuck it into a slot on the countertop, then took a fifty-dollar bill from the drawer in front of her and slid it across the counter.

"What's this?" Elizabeth was dumbfounded.

"First time here, honey?" The lady smiled as now the line behind Elizabeth seemed to be watching the exchange with some humor. Elizabeth nodded and turned

red. "See, the horse you bet to win in the last race won. And it was a long shot, paid twenty-five to one. You had a two dollar ticket so that's fifty bucks."

"Fifty-dollars?" Elizabeth was nearly faint and clumsily took the money and folded the bill quickly and slid it into her purse, almost dropping the new betting slip in the process. She moved away from the window to gather her breath.

*Fifty-dollars?* That was nearly what she earned in an entire week at work! Now numb, she went back outside to get some air, the horses being slowly led out from under the grandstand as they readied for the next race.

*Wow. Wow. Wow!*

Moving a discrete distance away from the temporarily thin crowd and appearing to look at the horses, Elizabeth opened her purse and carefully unfolded the fifty for closer inspection. It was a bit older, 'Series 1933-C'. It wasn't often that she had a fifty or a hundred; who ever needed to carry around so much cash? Despite being older and looking slightly different the bill was in good shape.

The next day Elizabeth went on an audition for the lead in a *David Mamet* play '*Oleanna*', a two-man play which normally she never would have wasted her time auditioning for. She auditioned a few times a month but always for minor roles or as an extra just to keep the SAG card (*Screen Actor's Guild*) she'd gotten for appearing in a small independent film a few years back. That night she got a call past nine o'clock which irritated her as all of her friends and family knew her to be an early riser but this call was okay.

"So. I'm Carol," she told her brother David when they met for coffee.

"What?" He sipped his coffee.

"*Oleanna*'. It's a..."

"...*Mamet* play, yes, of course. I know it."

"Well...I auditioned for it yesterday. Got the call last night. "

"Dear god, not after eight I hope." She smiled at his remark. "That's great. No, that's more than great. That's incredible. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"When does it start?"

"We start rehearsals next week. Opens July fifteenth.

"Oh, and also, I almost forgot," she reached into her purse. "Coffee's on me." She unfolded the fifty dollar bill and made it do a little dance side-to-side on the table top.

"Fifty bucks? Why are you carrying..."

"...*Because*," she drew the word out. "I won it at the horse track yesterday."

David smiled. "You don't say."