

## Old Suits

a short story by Harvey Stanbrough, writing as Nick Porter

The man took a carefully folded handkerchief from the breast pocket of his sports jacket. He dabbed a bit of sweat from between his eyebrows. “Damn. You know, it all happened very quickly, just as people say. I mean, after the fact, they often talk about how quickly such things happen.

“In fact, it happened so quickly it would have been difficult to record with any degree of accuracy. Even if I’d had a better perspective.” He glanced around the room. “For example, if I’d been sitting over there by the window.”

He pointed. “Or over there by the bar or near the end of the room. Or perhaps there beside the door to the café. Any of those would make an excellent vantage point. As it was, of course, I was too involved with self-preservation to be bothered with trying to record and remember facts anyway.” He chuckled.

A look crossed the reporter’s face before he could hide it.

The man raised one hand. “Oh, no no. Please forgive the laughter. Nerves. After all, such things don’t happen every day.” He looked about. “Not in Chicago anyway.

“That’s where we’re from. Chicago.

“Anyway, there were only the two of us at the moment, myself and Tom. The ladies had excused themselves. Odd. Just like last night, when the ladies excused themselves to powder their noses or some such thing.

“Tom and I were chatting about a poem he’d written awhile back.

“In the poem, he’d begun with the premise that one day he would run with the bulls. It would be a sunny, hot day and he would run barefoot. Otherwise too he would be garbed exactly like the others with a white scarf tied around his head. He would also wear loose white pants, a loose shirt, and a red scarf about the waist.

“He would utter a prayer to San Fermin.

“He would run and he would be successful. And he would be in Pamplona alone and unattached, like a favorite writer of his from the old days. That is key.

“If he did not run, he said, he would at least have to watch from a balcony over the street while enjoying a bottle of merlot. But oh, he was definitely going to run. He harbored no doubts about that. And after he ran and did not fall and was neither trampled nor gored— well, that’s where the dream of his poem began.

“If those things happened, he thought, he would attain a new level of physicality.

“You’ve heard of those who have attained various levels of enlightenment as a result of the mind and spirit working in concert, right? Well Tom’s thinking was along the same lines.

“First, he would experience the physicality of running with the bulls. So his feet would be flying over cobblestones and his arms pumping at his sides and his nose opened wide and straining to deliver air to his lungs. His heart would be slamming furiously against his ribs to supply oxygen to his muscles.

“And if he could do that, he would reach a new level of physicality, one so elevated and strong that others would be able to share in it.” The man leaned forward a bit and said quietly, “I think he wanted to

relive his youth.”

He straightened. “Oh, he had it all worked out.

“Afterward, to more strongly experience the new level of physicality he had attained, first he would put off the celebration. He would subdue the emotions, contain them. He would find a telephone and he would call his wife and friends in Chicago.

“He would tell them about the run, and he would do his best to draw a picture in words for them. You know, of the start and the run itself and the end.

“Of the start, he imagined he would say that he listened too long to the sound of the first rocket and continued his prayer to San Fermin too long because of his excitement and his nerves. With that as a basis, he would then say that when the second rocket went off, it froze his heart for a moment because he hadn’t expected it. Oh, and he would add that he thought that moment might cost him his life if a bull plunged up behind him on Cuesta de Santa Domingo just as he hesitated. Which of course it would have.

“To describe the run itself, he thought probably he would mention the odor of the bulls’ breath because it must be strong. And he would explain that the air also was permeated with the sounds of the bulls’ chests heaving even over the sounds of their hooves.

“He would describe the slickness of their slobber, and it being slung all over as they passed La Plaza del Ayuntamiento. Then he’d shift back to the sounds of their hooves as the bulls thundered along behind him.” The man shrugged. “It’s too vivid a point to leave out, even though there are only six bulls in the run. Of course, his wife and friends are not aware of that fact.

“Then he would cut to the human aspect. He would tell of the sounds of myriad human footfalls and rasping breath. He would say how the scent of fear filled the air and hovered about head high. He would say those sounds and scents were all around, yet how insignificant and muted and lost they seemed mixed into the overpowering smells and sounds of the bulls.

“For verisimilitude, he imagined he might even tell them he had brushed the elbow of the man next to him on the right as they rounded the dangerous La Curva de Mercaderes hacia Estafeta. And he would say that for an instant he feared that slight brush would slow him or the other man too much. That one or the other of them might take a horn or be crushed against the wall.

“He would say that both he and the other man were fortunate to have escaped that accidental contact with their lives intact. Oh, and now they would be brothers. They would exchange knowing looks as long as they were in proximity to each other. And of course, international Christmas cards each year.

“Of course, his wife and his friends would never experience such profound physicality for themselves. For that reason he would describe the end of the run brilliantly with the use of many exclamation points. He would talk of the last man gored.

“It would be the only goring he witnessed personally. And he would witness that one only because he would leap to the right where La Curva de Telefónica turned into Callejón. And with that leap, the bull and the man—impaled through the abdomen on one horn—would pass him in the next second.

“He would say, very dramatically, that he had rolled to his feet but that he looked to his right a moment too soon. ‘Oh, you won’t believe this,’ he would tell them, ‘but the impaled man had a white-knuckle death

grip on the other horn with both hands. He was not struggling to free himself, but just holding on and being ripped open more with each lunge.'

"And if they were still on the line after that, he would describe in vivid detail the look on the man's face: the pouring sweat and tears, the jaw slung open to scream, but with no air in his lungs to carry it, and the horrifying lack of fear in his eyes, the fear having been replaced by a morbid acceptance and a terrible, vacant stare.

"He would finish by saying something about that scene haunting him all the rest of his days. After all, a foot to the right and it might have been him clinging to that horn and wishing the end would come.

"But of course, bragging to those who can never hope to understand is no real reward. If anything, it's a source of frustration.

"But he wouldn't make that phone call to celebrate. He would make that phone call because it would be expected. After all, who wouldn't brag about such an achievement? So in a way, the telephone call would fulfill his duty.

"Ah, but *after* that phone call—*after* the exchanged 'love yous' and 'be carefuls' with his wife and the 'don't do anything I wouldn't dos' punctuated with nervous laughter by his friends—*that* is when he would reap the true rewards of his heightened level of physicality.

"At about the same time the phone hit the cradle, he would rock his head back and laugh more lustfully than ever before. Suddenly he would be able to share his exultation with the world and with even the very air he breathed. He would hoist toasts to San Fermin and to The Run and to The Bulls and to his favorite Writer, the Man who, like himself, had earned a capital M on the front of the noun that was merely common to most other men.

"He would consume liquor with impunity, certain it would no longer affect him as it affects mere mortals. Best of all, he would twirl dozens of laughing Spanish maidens across the dance floor. Oh, they would never have encountered such a man. And eventually he would select That One who connected with his newfound physicality like no other.

"She would be rare indeed. Her hair and her eyes would be as jet black silk. Her skin and her words would be olive, soft and smooth. Her soul would reflect his joy and direct his need. And the lightest beginnings of her touch would expand his chest and render him a giant among men.

"Her urgent response to his unspoken invitation would warm him through the night. And he would dream late into the morning of attaining higher and higher levels of physicality, accompanied at every turn by that same magnificent woman." The man sighed.

Then he shrugged. "That was his dream. So while the women were in the ladies' room, I shifted my merlot to one side. I clasped my hands in front of me like this—you see? I did that to show my sincerity. And then I leaned forward over the table and said, 'But Tom, what then?'"

The man fell silent, looked at the floor for a moment and shook his head lightly. Then he looked at the reporter. "I mean, think about that. You and I are here, now. We may become aware of physicalities at any moment of our choosing. But mostly we are aware that time does not stop and it does not move backward.

"My friend Tom left his dry-cleaning business to come here. He first mentioned all of this over lunch

one day when we were still in Chicago. He took a bite of his Reuben sandwich, looked at me and said, 'Nick'—my name is Nick—he said, 'Nick, you've known me what, forty years? You were there. You know what I've been, my friend, what we both were back in the day.'"

The man smiled. "We were in the Marine Corps of the United States together when we were young.

"Anyway, then Tom said, 'You knew me then, and you know me now.' And I'll never forget this next bit. He said, 'You know what I was, and you know what I am.' And he said 'what I am' as if it were a major disappointment.

"And I remember thinking, Where was that coming from?

"But before I could say anything, he said, 'I'm just an old suit lying in a forgotten corner in a dusty attic. Just once more in my life, I'm going to really *live*.'

"That's when he asked me if I remembered his poem, and he described it a little.

"I said yes, I remembered.

"And he said he was going to run with the bulls like in that poem. And afterward, he said, he was going to call home to boast. And then he would drink and dance and enjoy all that life has to offer, just one more time. And he said to me, 'Nicky, nobody—nobody *ever*—will be able to take that from me.'"

Nick shrugged. "And he's my friend, so here we are.

"So while the women were in the bathroom last night— Well, first, we were sitting at that table right over there, see? Closer to the wall. I tried to tell him it's all right. And it was. I mean, everything was all right.

"Even if you run with the bulls on a clean, clear day, and even if you *don't* slip and discover 'eternal glory' in the simple act of a foolish, middle-aged man being gored, what then?

"That's what I asked him. Would you then drink and dance all night with impunity?

"No, of course not. You would drink until you passed out. You would hope for a good friend to pour you into your bed.

"And would you wake with a lovely señorita on your shoulder, warm against your chest?

"Again, no. You would wake with a throbbing head and a mouth that tasted like an elephant slept on your tongue.

"So I told him it was all right."

Nick shrugged. "After all, not all days are sunny even in Pamplona. I mean, clouds build, right? And people do grow older and get tired everywhere? And surely dust settles?

"So for the *coup de gras*, I reminded him that even his hero Hemingway quit early.

"You are a reporter, so you must know of Hemingway. The man was larger than life. He hunted and fished and fought and drank and danced to the point of exhaustion. But in the end, he still had never learned the value of settling into something comfortable.

"And that is the value of old suits and forgotten corners and attics." Nick looked at the floor and shook his head.

He looked at the reporter. "That was last night, and I guess I finally convinced him. He decided not to run this morning after all. I've—"

His voice cracked and he stopped for a moment. Then he cleared his throat. “Do you know, we couldn’t find a single damn seat on a single damn balcony along the entire route?”

He looked away for a moment and shook his head again. “We were just too late. Sometimes it seems like everything is just a bit later than it should have been. At least until you need things to be a bit off.”

He looked away again, hesitant, then back. “I had never given a lot of thought to physicality, yet it’s all Tom talked about.

“But now— now I finally understand.

“When that window exploded behind me and I leapt to my feet— in that second, my chair shifted to the right a split second before that bull tore the left side of my trousers with his right horn.”

Nick stared at the reporter. “He missed me by less than an inch, do you understand? He was a split-second too late, see?

“But he was right on time for Tom. And I could swear Tom was smiling as the horns tore into him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

### **About the Author**

Nicolas Z. Porter is an expatriot, having moved in better times to a small place in the hills above the fishing village of Agua Rocosa. He is an adventurer who enjoys deep-sea fishing, trout fishing in the back country, engaging intimately in the revolutionary struggles of other lands, and any other endeavors that might serve to refill the well of experience from which he draws his stories. Bradbury once wrote, “I love to write. It’s all I do.” Nick has been known to say the same thing, often. A man who unapologetically takes full responsibility for his own life and flatly refuses to accept responsibility for poor choices made by others, he also has been known to say, sometimes loudly, “Writers write. There are no excuses for a writer not to write. There are only priorities. Set your priorities as you will, but don’t whine about it. The whining destroys my concentration.” As you might imagine, Nick’s priority is writing, and he’s pretty prolific.

\* \* \* \* \*