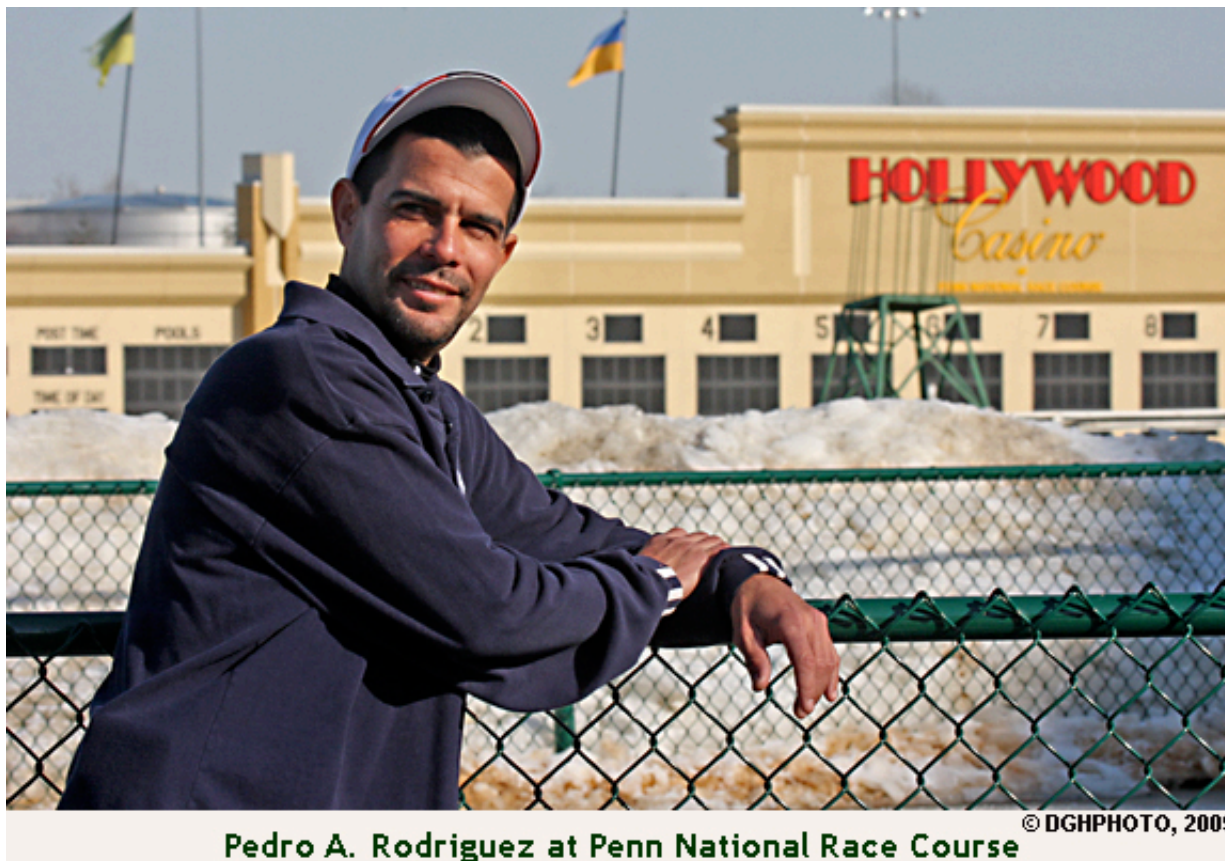


Timing is Everything, Especially for a Jockey

by Dennis G. Hogan



Pedro A. Rodriguez at Penn National Race Course

Pedro Rodriguez had waited years for such a moment: the chance to compete on an international stage in Grade I company. It didn't matter much that a purse of 2.6 million dollars was also on the line. Pedro learned years earlier that passion was the important thing. Money would follow passion no matter where it was headed. Could he have been more prepared? Sure, but as a regular member of the Finger Lakes jockey colony his job description had not included globe-trekking. And who ever thought that three seemingly blue-collar guys would have ever been invited half-way round the world to compete in the Japan Cup Dirt, one of Asia's most prestigious races? The invitation had taken the team of Pedro, 2008 Finger Lakes Horse of the Year Tin Cup Chalice, owner - trainer Mike LeCesse and owner - breeder Scott Van Laer, by complete surprise. 2008 was a magical year for these connections. Tin Cup captured 6 of 7 races, and his win streak had

reminded the entire New York Thoroughbred community that in racing anything is possible. Still few had imagined that the over-achieving son of Crusader Sword would punctuate the year by boarding a plane for the Far East.

After some twenty years in the irons Pedro Rodriguez knew that you can't rush things. He'd learned a great deal about his craft from watching others - modern-day masters like Jerry Bailey and Pat Day. "The best jockeys," he remarked, "are the ones who stay out of trouble. They time their moves perfectly. They don't move too soon or too late - they are patient." Pedro too would remain calm. All the paperwork had been filed. It was simply a matter of time before the passport arrived. Each morning he'd check the mailbox outside the Manchester, New York home he shares with his girlfriend Odalis, and their 7-year-old daughter Angel. Although he tried to be patient, as the days passed he began to get anxious.

Pedro and Tin Cup had become pals. Together they had crossed the wire first on six occasions. Their only loss came in the Step Nicely Stakes at Belmont, a prep for the GII Indiana Derby. "That day he was so anxious, he tried to go under the gate," recalls Pedro. "The crew pulled him up by the reins, the gate opened and I got left. I had to push him a bit but he gathered himself and was closing at the end. If that race was a few strides longer I would have won."

A few weeks later Pedro would be vindicated as he piloted Tin Cup to a front-running score in the Indiana Derby, outpacing '08 classic contender Pyro, and IEAH stable's Acai. "The horse to beat was Pyro, but for whatever reason he didn't have the best trip. I was on the lead and Acai was close. I could hear Tyler (Baze) pushing him so I knew I had him beat. All the time Tin Cup wanted to go but I wouldn't let him. Finally, I heard Shaun (Bridgmohan) screaming with Pyro. I asked Tin Cup for more and he just drew off." The win was their first Grade II victory. It also served to further galvanize the team and bring them even closer. "We've all gotten to be such good friends," remarked Scott. "I just can't imagine another jockey or trainer touching this horse."

They left Indiana with a plan. Tin Cup would be pointed toward Aqueduct's Cigar Mile, a GI event for 3-year-olds and up. Here the water would certainly get deeper as TCC would face older horses. Some days later Mike LeCesse received a call. The person on the other end informed him that his 'big horse' had been invited to compete in the Japan Cup Dirt. Mike laughed at first. A few of his buddies must have been pulling his leg, he thought. But the caller's voice never broke stride and Mike realized the invite was for real. And what a sweet deal it was: the Japan Racing Association would pay for transportation and board for the horse, trainer, owners and jockey; the purse reached comfortably into the seven-figures, and all one had to do to pick up a check was finish in the top ten. Yet Tin Cup had developed an abscess on one of his legs. Though even with a sore leg he was forever true to his farm name, Pistol. As usual he was kicking down the stall and full of run. Scott was blown away by the news of the invitation, but he wanted to do what was best for the horse. As time passed the blemish on Pistol's leg began to heal. So, "why not?" They figured, "let's forego the Cigar Mile and ship to Japan."



COURTESY JRA

2008 would mark the ninth running of the Japan Cup Dirt, although it was the first time that Hanshin Race Course, located just outside of Osaka, would play host. Hanshin is a right-handed handed course, so they would be running clockwise. It is not a course of level grade, not a true oval, and its profile - a base of crushed rock overlain by some eight inches of mountain sand hidden beneath a three-inch surface of loose sand, has been designed to accommodate the copious amounts of rain the region receives. If wet, Hanshin favors the front-runner; when dry, its deep granular grip will take hold of even the most fleet of foot. Besides Tin Cup, two other Americans would make the trip, Bobby Frankel's '08 Hollywood Gold Cup winner Mast Track, and Rick Dutrow's Frost Giant, who'd recently turned heads taking the Suburban at 40-1. Still the only American, or for that matter the only visiting horse to ever win the race was Fleetstreet Dancer back in 2003. For the Americans, somehow finishing within the top ten would not be a fait accompli.

The Tin Cup team spent the majority of October, and all of November in anticipation of the challenge. Everything would need to go smoothly if they were to have a solid chance. Mike began training the horse to run clock-wise, and Pedro was aboard regularly in the mornings. Tin Cup's abscess completely healed and all appeared to be going well. The race would be run Sunday, December 7th, and the horse would ship November 19th. This would allow Tin Cup enough time to get through the mandatory quarantine period, and then enjoy a good two weeks to acclimate himself to the foreign surface and surroundings. Pedro would make the trip with Mike just before Thanksgiving, and Scott would arrive right as the calendar changed on December 1st.

Everyone traveled as planned and all arrived in good order - except for Pedro. He continued to rummage through the daily assortment of cards and letters in search of the passport, yet the mail only brought frustration. The connections were well aware how important it was to have him aboard in Japan, but the Tin Cup team was running perilously short of time. Quickly, Thanksgiving passed, and like a patina of fresh-fallen snow December was soon upon them. Scott and Mike were forced to make yet another measured decision - Pedro would have to be replaced.

“Ultimately, we would have wished Pedro Rodriguez would be in the irons but the quest to acquire his visa and passport has simply taken too long.”

*-Mike LeCesse's Trainer's Journal
December 3rd, 2008*

Pedro was crestfallen yet he realized that little else could be done. "Everything was going so fast," he recalls. "That would have been such a big experience to go to Japan, but unfortunately I didn't have my papers. I am still a Cuban resident living in America and working on a green card. I had everything ready to go, even the plane tickets - just no passport."



The Tin Cup team had lost a valuable member, and with the race just days away they sought a replacement. Mike and Scott turned to 2008 Hall of Fame inductee Edgar Prado. Edgar was not completely unfamiliar with the horse. He had almost nipped Tin Cup at the wire aboard That'srightofficer in the Albany, at Saratoga. Everyone including Pedro felt that with Edgar taking the call, Tin Cup was in capable hands.

The Japanese take their racing very seriously and as the week progressed the excitement at Hanshin mounted. Daily press briefings were attended by no less than 20 to 30 reporters representing the country's major news outlets and sporting magazines. "They sort of put the horse on a pedestal over there," noted Scott Van Laer. "The JCD is not even their biggest race. Yet they have that type of coverage for all their major races. Racing in Japan receives the sort of attention that baseball does in the United States."

Mike gave Tin Cup one last blow-out before the race and he responded brilliantly, clocking 5 furlongs in 59.1. He was the only American trainer to make the trip and the Japanese media rewarded his effort with a barrage of coverage. With reporters hanging on every word, Mike offered that his charge was a 'wise guy' horse, meaning he was a long shot but because of the way he was training, he was a live long shot. The local press ate it up and took a shine to the bay colt. Because Tin Cup had cheated death on two occasions one local paper remarked that he was reminiscent of 1990 Japan Horse of the Year, and legendary fan-favorite, Oguri Cap. Known as 'The Gray Monster,' Oguri Cap had also battled serious illness and returned victorious after a nine-month layoff. The media began calling Tin Cup the 'American Oguri.' A love affair

between the press and the fearless New York-bred was in full-swing.

Midweek prior to the race an inch of rain showered down upon Hanshin. It percolated through the thick and sandy course and caused the track to be speed-favoring. TC seemed to enjoy the track's surface and all reports stated he handled it well. On Saturday, one day before the race, the track was still wet, so much so, that a 2-year-old filly set a course record. Things started to look as if they were setting up well for Tin Cup and his front-running style. The local press seemed to adore him, and Edgar had picked up the mount. Now even the weather appeared to cooperate.

On Sunday, some forty-eight thousand fans poured into Hanshin. The Japan Cup Dirt was the 11th race on a card of 12. Temperatures climbed into the 60's, and throughout the afternoon the grounds crew worked tirelessly to maintain a surface that by race time was labeled fast. So far that day, not a single front-runner held on to win. Suddenly, any advantage Tin Cup may have had appeared to slip away. Earlier that morning Mast Track had been scratched; one report citing shoulder soreness, another - quarter cracks. Frost Giant also felt the pressure, fractious and washed-out in the paddock, Cornelio Velasquez had his hands full just trying to keep the horse moving in a straight line.



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In the paddock at Hanshin (left to right) 1. Trainer Mike LeCesse; 2,3. Assistant Jan Keuer with Tin Cup Chalice; 4. Edgar Prado in the irons

Tin Cup wasn't his usual self either. A bit nervous in the post parade, he made his way toward the gate. In Japan, horses aren't accompanied to the post by pony-horses; another minor difference - or another major challenge for the Americans to overcome? With the sun upon them and the anticipation of the moment reduced from weeks to days, and now minutes, fifteen runners gathered at the start. One-by-one they entered the steel structure. It leveled the playing field if only for a few seconds. All in attendance watched as they loaded. Scott and his wife Michale sat in the stands with a camera trained upon them to catch their reactions. Mike sat nearby, poised in case yet another trip to the winner's circle was to be in order.

Some six-thousand miles away, the chill of an upstate December morning was felt by the rest of the Tin Cup team. They and the hometown fans gathered at 2 am to watch the race live on the jumbo-size monitor at the Finger Lakes racino. Few words were spoken among them; it was emotion not words that would describe the moment. The whirling drone of video slot machines

whipped through the cavernous corridors like a cold whistling wind. In a secluded spot upstairs, blanketed only by the hypnotic hum, Pedro Rodriguez sat alone. In the moments before a race a jockey must go within, to gather himself, and in transcendence become one with his mount. Post time arrived. Pedro's heart beat faster and tears made their way down along his cheek. He clenched his fists about the reins and grabbed a piece of Pistol's mane - if only to imagine what would happen next. He closed his eyes for but a split-second, yet in that moment his entire life flashed before him.

PART II

"My father was a farmer. He had horses but I had no idea about race horses. I had no idea about riding - until I got to Miami." Pedro Rodriguez was like many an immigrant who touched down upon Florida's shores: in his heart he sought a better life. A life in a country where anything seemed possible. He arrived with a belief that if he worked hard good things would come.

"I grew up in Cuba, in a small town about an hour outside of Havana called Agucate. There was really no future for me in Cuba, so my two brothers and I, we first went to Costa Rica, from there we came to Florida. My brothers found jobs and training and now they are master electricians. But I always liked the farm, the animals, and the country.

One day a friend and I went to Calder. I watched the riders and thought, I can do this. I asked my friend, do you know anybody here? He said, "there is a Cuban trainer. Maybe he can do something to help you." So the next day we went back to the track and introduced ourselves to the trainer Luis Olivares. I told him I want you to teach me to become a jockey because I got the weight and I know about horses. He was not in such a good mood, so he didn't pay any attention to me. Then the next day I went back to the track. I see Olivares and he says to me, "You again. I don't like teaching nobody no more." So I said, Sir, if you don't want to help me that's fine, but I'm Cuban like you, and I just need a favor. I need to work. I just got here to this country and I need to make money. So he says OK. He started me from the bottom: walking horses, cleaning stalls, putting on bandages, jogging horses. I worked for him for two and a half years. All this time I kept asking him to let me ride, please let me ride. He says to me, "be patient. I want to do the right thing with you so when you begin you know what you are doing." So, we did things his way and finally, in 1988, I started riding."



Like Pedro, Luis Olivares had also left Cuba. He got out just at the time Castro came in. Having had the benefit of being around horses all his life, he found work riding mounts in South Florida. For Luis riding came naturally, but keeping the weight off did not. As a result he turned to



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**Pedro with Brave Bandito
in the backfield of
Penn National Race Course**

training. He did well, winning the Hollywood Invitational, and once running third in the Arlington Million. As a regular on the Calder, Hialeah and Gulfstream circuit, he had seen many kids like Pedro, all eager for the spotlight and a quick buck. Yet the first time they got dirt kicked in their faces, they'd quit, leaving Luis and the investment he'd made in them to wither on the vine. "I was getting old at the time and tired of teaching others, but I could see Pedro really wanted to learn."

At Calder in 1988, Pedro brought home his first winner, a horse named Viange. He would go on to win an additional 42 races that year, a number good enough to earn him a nomination for leading national apprentice, although he would finish second to Jose Martinez. The following year he was the top bug rider at Calder. He had crossed the wire first 189 times, including 9 stakes wins. By the end of '92, he had chalked up a total of 893 wins and developed a solid reputation within the South Florida jockey colonies. Then in January of '95, his success came down like a house of cards. "I got into a bad spill at Tampa Bay Downs on a horse called Tunecke Charlie. The horse broke down and as I was crashing to the ground another horse came along behind me and hit me in the jaw with his knee. If I got hit with the hoof I don't know where I'd be right now. The incident broke my jaw. They put about 20 screws and a plate on my right side, and my jaw had to be wired shut. The injury kept me out the rest of '95 and most of '96."

The setback had Pedro wondering if he'd ever ride again. Married and with a family to feed he turned his sights in a different direction. He opened a fish store and restaurant close to the same Tampa raceway where the injury had occurred. He called the store Red Snapper, and worked tirelessly to make it a success. Yet he struggled with the fledgling business and the bills piled up. He sold off many of his assets just to keep the doors open. Things appeared hopeless until one day he received a visit from an old friend.

"He asked me, "do you want to go back to riding?" But I said I've been off for too long. I'm not ready!" Luis Olivares, the man who had given Pedro his start back in 1985, was there to offer him a second chance. Luis recalls, "I asked him, do you wanna' be a rider? Then what are you doing in a fish store? I told Pedro, I'm going to give you a job galloping horses and when you are ready to ride again, you let me know. He was like a son to me. I had to get him a paycheck - that was the only way he would come back to riding."

Thanks to Luis, by late '96 Pedro had found his way back. At Tropical Park that year he won 26 races including 3 stakes. Suddenly, everything changed for the better. Then in '97 Pedro landed the mount on burgeoning Florida-bred superstar Nancy's Glitter. Riding for trainer Freddy Knibbs, Pedro guided the 2-year-old daughter of Glitterman to 5 straight victories, 3 of which made history. Nancy's Glitter was the first horse to capture the filly division of the Florida

Stallion Series. After wire-to-wire victories in the Desert Vixen, the Susan's Girl, and the My Dear Girl Stakes, Pedro and Nancy's Glitter would go all the way to Hollywood Park to compete in the 1997 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies. There he matched strides with Countess Diana before fading on the far turn.



Pedro and Nancy's Glitter, 1997

Despite the success Pedro would soon face other challenges. With an influx of new talent arriving in Florida, mounts began drying up, so he decided to try something different. He headed north to Finger Lakes Race Course, arriving at the upstate New York oval in June of 2002. Once there he spied a few familiar faces like Oscar Barrera and Mike Ferraro, Jr. He had ridden for these trainers in Florida so it was pretty much assured that they would give him a leg-up here as well. He booted home several winners - clearly, he had hit the ground running. But then in August he simply hit the ground. Another spill would sideline him, this time with a separated shoulder. It was a setback but it would not cause him to exit the game entirely as he had back in '95. Like a prizefighter sent to the canvas he would rise, a bit shaken and a bit slowed, but with enough strength to carry on and face the next round.



Pedro grew to love New York, even the cold and snowy upstate winters. Yet although he had bid farewell to the tropical Florida climes, Florida it seemed would not forget entirely about him. In 2005, he was inducted into the Calder Race Course Hall of Fame. It was a great day for Pedro as he would again and forever be united with his



PHOTO COURTESY PEDRO A. RODRIGUEZ

**Pedro Rodriguez and Luis Olivares
at the Calder Race Track
Hall of Fame induction, 2005**

onetime teacher and mentor, Luis Olivares, he too an inductee in 2002. Like so many of Cuba's favorite sons who had reached the shores of the Sunshine State, they had done well - but the best was yet to come.

PART III

Mike LeCesse had taken note of Pedro when he first arrived at Finger Lakes back in '02. And it didn't take long for Pedro to convince Mike to take a shot with him, just as he had convinced Luis years earlier. "I'm pretty tight," Mike told him, "but I'll give you a shot as soon as I can." Mike was true to his word and together he and Pedro would become a force at Finger Lakes. Pedro regained some of the form he had shown earlier in his career, and Mike would come to offer him his better mounts.

Then in '08 Mike said, "we're gonna' make a lotta' money this year." Pedro smiled at the comment not knowing exactly what Mike had up his sleeve. One morning he sat atop what he assumed was just another of the young colts LeCesse was bringing along. Pedro breezed him for 3/8's then Mike asked, "what do you think of this horse?" "I don't know because he didn't work too well," answered Pedro. Mike laughed. "Do you know who this is?" He asked. "It's Tin Cup Chalice!" Pedro was stunned. He knew Tin Cup had already notched 2 wins under fellow jockey Omar Camejo. "Do me a favor," Pedro asked Mike. "Don't let anyone else on this horse. I want to be on him every morning." Mike agreed. It was time for his top rider to take the reins of his top horse.

"His first start of the year was an allowance at Finger Lakes. He was so anxious to get out of the gate. My God, when the gate opened he broke in the air and I had to check. I was last and had a wall of horses in front of me. There was only a small hole to go through. I had to do it or else I would have clipped heels. I got through and he won by 4 and a half. Two weeks later he won again, wire-to-wire. I never hit him once - he did everything himself.

Many big agents were now calling, for John Velazquez, and Cornelio Velasquez. But Mike was confident in me and I got to keep the mount. In the Mike Lee, he got bumped at the start but he went to the lead and stayed there all the way. I have ridden a lot of good horses, but this horse is something special because when he goes to the lead he relaxes himself. Some horses - less talented horses, you have to make them relax, but he does it all by himself."

Relaxed and on the lead, Pedro and Tin Cup next took the NY Derby.

Then history was made at Saratoga, as the front-running duo wired them in the Albany Stakes. Tin Cup became the first horse ever to capture the OTB Big Apple Triple, and the quarter-million dollar bonus that came with it. Eleven years earlier Pedro had also piloted Nancy's Glitter, the first filly to ever sweep the Florida Stallion Series. Indeed, he had shown that lightning can strike the same person twice.

Come September at Belmont a troubled start would cost them the Step Nicely, yet they would rebound nicely at Hoosier Downs, with a win in the Indiana Derby. It all happened so fast. An incredible run, a special year - but their biggest challenge still awaited them.



PHOTO COURTESY FINGER LAKES GAMING
**Pedro Rodriguez and Tin Cup Chalice
on the lead in the 2008 New York Derby**

PART IV

The bell sounded. It cut through the moment like a whiff of smelling salts and Pedro snapped back to attention. Some six-thousand miles away a gate sprung open and unleashed a torrent of horses. Slowly they set out in clock-like fashion, fifteen in all spread across the track. Through the teary blur moved a solitary runner; an unmistakable streak of crimson and white. It was Pistol, and like a bullet he shot to the lead. The ground rose under their feet as they climbed their way into the first turn. Success Brocken, also known for his speed inched closer to Tin Cup. Throughout the run up the backstretch those two would dominate the announcer's call. Brocken put a head in front, but Tin Cup responded as he always had, countering the challenge of his Japanese rival. Yet Brocken had more. He too knew a few things about pace; he too had something to prove. As they entered the far turn the ground beneath them began to dip. Like quicksand it weakened both warriors. A wave of horses enveloped them and as they exited the turn all signs of Brocken and the American challenger seemed to fade. Streaks of blue and yellow, and black and red had charged to the forefront. An entirely new race unfolded as Kane Hekili, Meisho Tokon and Vermilion powered past the exhausted frontrunners and battled on to the finish.



PHOTO COURTESY JRA

Kane Hekili charges toward the wire in the 2008 Japan Cup Dirt

Pedro's gaze remained fixed upon the screen. He waited until the very end, if only to make sure that Tin Cup was OK. He wiped his eyes dry and lost all regrets. He knew Edgar had done his best. He had sat patiently and allowed Tin Cup to do what he did best, relax on the lead. When another horse came to him he let Tin Cup respond and pull away, as was his nature. But there was simply too much to do, too many variables and too many other good - possibly great horses to contend with. Kane Hekili, the 'Thunder God', was not only a multiple Grade I winner, he was now a repeat winner of the Japan Cup Dirt. Sidelined for some two and a half years he had come back to win again - much like another great Japanese champion, the legendary Oguri Cap.

The Japan Cup Dirt was over. Pedro reached into his pocket for his keys and headed out into the parking lot. He stepped into his truck and made his way through the cold December night, back to the warmth of his home and the love of Odalis and his daughter Angel. The following Monday Pedro got dressed, he had breakfast and then checked his mail. There among the bills and the circulars he found an envelope. It was his passport. Timing is everything, especially for a jockey.

Timing is Everything, Especially for a Jockey is Part III of the Tin Cup Chalice Trilogy. You can find Part I: All in the Cards, and Part II: The Whitney Set the Die, in the ThoroFan archives.

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