

Janet Schneider

Winter Migration

Jerome's back twinge, his knees' stiffness, and the rigidity in his wrinkled brown-skinned hands remind him that he's 75. It's November, 4:30 in the morning and the room's cold air creates vapor clouds when he exhales. Usually this time of the year he calls his sister in Tallahassee, Florida to tell her when to expect him. But he won't this year. She died a few weeks after the start of the racing season.

His wool sock-covered feet touch the rough wooden floor. He rubs his eyes. He strikes a match and stretches toward the rusty camp stove set on the rickety round table. That old wooden table found out near the dumpster back in early April was a good find. About the time the horses started arriving.

He fills his one pot with water and places it on the flame. He hears his neighbor, another Churchill Downs' groom, moving around his 60 square foot unit next door. Though grooms' rooms are above the stables, no sounds come from the horses. Jerome lifts the dishtowel he uses as a bucket lid and pees into the almost filled container placed next to the door. His worn knees make it difficult for him to go up and down the stairs to the bathroom. He'll take the bucket with him on the way down to the barn, careful not to splash his clothes.

After he turned 70 he stopped following trainers to southern tracks in the winter. Instead, after the Thanksgiving Day races, he would take his one battered suitcase packed with his underwear, a few shirts, and his church-going pants to his sister's. He'll miss her teasing him about being a snowbird — what they call those northern people who temporarily flock to warmer parts. He had rolled up his mattress pad and packed up a box with his sheet and towels, a few utensils, and various baseball caps that protected his coffee-colored balding head from the Kentucky sun and stored them in the storage locker he and some other grooms rented in Louisville, not far from Churchill Downs. But now he plans to leave everything but his caps for the next groom who'll call this room home during the

2015 season. He kept shorts, a bathing suit, and sandals at his sister's. No use for a bathing suit and sandals here. During season he works eighteen hours, seven days a week. Never missed a day.

The water simmers. Jerome makes a cup of tea. He used to love coffee but his stomach started giving him problems a few years back. Now he gets his caffeine from black tea. Sometimes he adds non-dairy creamer from the little containers he slips into his pockets from old Wagner's Restaurant across the street. But he hasn't been in that pharmacy/restaurant combo in a while. Been too busy. He'll have to get there next week before he leaves, to pick up the horse liniment oil he rubs on his arthritic hands. He still may need it where he's going.