

*Nice
Round
Numbers*

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I played nine, my lucky number. The croupier gave the wheel a spin without putting a wrinkle in his well-tailored tuxedo. His thin black mustache stayed tight over his lip. The ball bounced around like a candy wrapper caught in a whirlwind, like a cue ball about to scratch.

The Riverboat Gambler was a floating casino that seemed to go around in circles, docking at some port every couple of days to replenish its supply of suckers. I came aboard with two-hundred dollars in my pocket and not a penny more to my name. I managed to bail out of Miami one step ahead of a warrant with my name on it, like I was public enemy number one. Fraud, forgery and theft were the charges, not murder.

The wheel slowed. The ball bounced a few more times before deciding to land on eight, a nice round number with a good figure, plenty of curves, but not what I was betting on. I watched half my money fly away like it had wings and what was left in my pocket started to feel pretty light.

I wasn't shedding any tears, though. I'd been in tight spots before and something always turned up.

"Tough luck, pal."

I felt a soft hand patting my shoulder to go along with the sympathetic voice.

"It's only money," I said. "There's plenty more where that came from."

"That's a good attitude. Too bad more people didn't think like you."

He smiled, showing a row of well-manicured white teeth, like ducks floating

around a shooting gallery.

"No sense being a sore loser. Why not spread it around?"

"It being the money," he said, curling his lips around a long narrow cigarette, drawing it out of the pack.

"What else?"

He introduced himself and offered to buy me a drink. I needed one. He already had a few in him and by our third double Scotch, I knew his life story.

His name was Teddy Plisinski. He'd made a small fortune in laundry supplies and preferred to spend it on travel and gambling. A great combination if you were rich, semi-retired and queer as a three dollar bill.

This cruise was a business trip for him, a small convention of short, round, middle-aged men with little more in common than the price of laundry detergent and the latest brand of plastic bag. They were looking to blow off some steam, spend some money and get drunk without worrying about their wives and children or the ride home.

There's always more to the story, and with this guy, there's plenty more. His grandfather was one of the original Boston bootleggers, a millionaire ten times over and a horny old rascal that nailed anything that moved. Except, when his youngest daughter turns up pregnant, he tosses her out, disowns her. She gives birth to Teddy and no sooner, gives him up for adoption.

Now, forty years later, the geezer is on his deathbed, wrestling with a guilty conscience. He wants to make it right between him and the grandson he never met. Some guys have all the luck.

"By making it right, you mean money," I asked?

Teddy mumbled drunkenly, barely audible, "What else?"

We decided to take a stroll on deck, clear our heads. The night air on the Gulf was cool. The wind blew in from the west carrying a salty spray that you could taste. It stuck to my skin and irritated my eyes. We leaned against the rail and lit a couple of cigarettes, nothing around but black water and a dark endless night.

The ship rose and fell with the rolling waves. Teddy swayed, asleep on his feet. I thought he was going to be sick and I'd get stuck playing nursemaid. He could barely find his mouth with the cigarette and I caught him a couple of times just before his face hit the deck. He wasn't passing any field sobriety tests.

"It's not like I need the money, you know," Teddy blurted drunkenly.

"Why should I give him the satisfaction? The man means nothing to me."

"I know what I would do if I were you," I said smiling.

"What's that?"

"I'd play along until the old guy kicked. It's easy money if you ask me and the inheritance does rightly belong to you. Why piss it away? Don't let your emotions get the best of you. If you hate the guy so much, just think of the satisfaction you'll get when you're spending his money."

"I suppose you're right. I deserve that money. I got it coming to me."

Teddy was starting to make sense, thanks to me. I was always good at giving

advice. It was the listening part I had a problem with. I never got the hang of seeing trouble coming, never learned to duck. My hindsight was perfect.

"Hey Joe, do me a favor. Come on up to Boston with me. Be my guest."

Teddy fumbled with another cigarette and before he could get it lit, the whole pack tumbled over the side. He tried to catch it, made a lunging stab at it like a center fielder at the wall, and fell head first into the cold dark water.

I only took my eyes off him for a second before I heard the splash. It sounded a long way off.

If there was a life preserver hanging on the wall nearby, I would have thrown it to him. The way things stood though, I wanted no part of an official investigation and unless Teddy was a damn good swimmer, he was shark bait.

It wasn't until I got back to the bar that the idea hit me. Not that Teddy and I looked alike or had anything in common, but that stuff could be arranged. It was a matter of attitude more than anything else and if anyone could pull it off, I could.

As soon as that tin can hit the docks, I'd make tracks for New England, give Grandpa his grandson back and stick around just long enough to collect. I'd have to keep my fingers crossed that good old Teddy enjoys his swim and doesn't wash up on some distant shore.

I made it back to Teddy's room without running into any nosy neighbors and managed the door without much coaxing. I tried on a couple of his high priced shirts and a pair of leather boat shoes. Teddy had good taste and most of the stuff fit.

I found Teddy's precious letter of introduction, my lottery ticket. I read it over

twice, memorized some of the consequential details and tucked it neatly into my pocket. Teddy's wallet was fat. The kind you tie to your belt with a gold chain. It would take some getting used to, bulging in my back pocket. I was going to enjoy being Teddy Plisinki.

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Airplanes made me nervous but after three glasses of Johnny Walker in the airport lounge and three more on the plane, altitude no longer mattered. We dropped through the clouds and the Boston skyline appeared. Gray rectangular buildings rippled in the air like a mirage. We touched down hard, bounced a few times and came to a screeching halt at the end of the runway.

Grandfather lived in a stone mansion on five acres with a circular cobblestone drive, a swimming pool and more rooms than the Hilton. I picked up a rental car at the airport with Teddy's platinum Visa. I drove nice and slow through that neighborhood, didn't want anyone calling the cops. I memorized Teddy's address, date of birth and social security number. If Teddy told the truth and Grandpa never laid eyes on him, this should be a very happy reunion.

I danced up the steps like a freshman home from college and waited while the doorbell chimed away like the Cathedral on Sunday morning. I fixed my tie and leaned against a bored looking granite lion, sitting like a poodle on the porch.

The spring chicken that answered the door didn't know what to make of me. I made her out just fine though. The late morning sun hit her like a spotlight in the doorway. Her straight blond hair glowed. You didn't know what part of her to look at first. She seemed to be moving even when she was standing still.

She was trying to hide what she had under a dark woolen sweater and pleated

pants. I'd have to be blind not to notice. I introduced myself and waited for a smile. It didn't come.

I played it cool. I could see this girl didn't pass out any favors for free and I didn't blame her. She seemed like the outdoor type, someone who was all bottled up in the house but when the wind took her and she got some grass under her feet, she could sure move.

"Are you going to invite me in?"

"I'm sorry," she said, the mask of confusion tightening over her face.

"Don't apologize. I should be the one apologizing. You're not exactly what I expected."

"And what were you expecting?"

"A bald guy in a smelly bathrobe."

"If you're referring to Mr. Solomon, I don't think he'd appreciate that."

"He'd forgive his only grandson. Wouldn't he?"

"You're Theodore?"

"In the flesh."

I tried to smile like Teddy on the night of his fateful demise, show a lot of teeth and soften the cheek. I wasn't sure if I fooled her, not at first, not a girl like that, who was used to all kinds of lines. Though I doubted any of them were as far from the

truth as the one I was selling.

I followed her into a large foyer, portraits and tapestries on the walls, full-length curtains over stain-glass windows. Her heels tapped lightly on the parquet floor. She spoke to me in little more than a whisper.

"Mr. Solomon will be so happy to see you. He's thought about nothing else since he knew you were coming."

"Same here," I answered, following the sway of her hips down a darkened hallway.

The old man had a king-size bed set up in the parlor. A fire from the night before still smoldered in the fireplace. Dark, heavy curtains were drawn over a picture window that looked out onto a rolling green lawn the length of a golf course. A lamp on the bedside table illuminated the coarse gray wisps of hair clinging to his bald scalp. A half glass of amber fluid, on the table, begged for a couple ice cubes. From the looks of it, Grandpa got started early.

"Bring me my glasses and my cane, Amanda. I won't have this young man watch me linger in bed like an invalid."

She hovered around him like a honeybee over a flower. She helped him to his feet and before he took two steps she had the bed made and began mixing drinks at the sideboard.

"I find Miss Neuhardt indispensable, as you can tell, my dear boy. The only woman I ever had any real use for. She has the true spirit of a sportsman. She can shoot with the best of them, gut and clean any fish in the sea and then cook it like a gourmet chef. She manages this estate and is a fully trained nurse. You'd be hard-

pressed to find one like that."

Miss Neuhardt opened the drapes and set two places at a small table by the window. While she helped the teetering old man into his chair, I came up a little too close behind her. She backed into me but I didn't move a muscle. I held my ground with a hand on her hip and another at her elbow. I guided her past me, felt her firm thighs brush against me. She didn't bat an eye.

"You don't have to convince me. I was sold from the start."

"Let me look at you, Theodore. You turned out to be quite a strapping fellow, nothing soft about you. If I didn't know better, I would have guessed you did a little time at hard labor."

"You don't look so bad yourself. Must run in the family. Threw your weight around a little back in the old days, if I have my story straight."

The old buck acknowledged with a smile and a nod, remembering what it was like to hold someone in his grip, kick someone when their down, show no mercy.

"How was your trip? Find the place all right?"

"No problem. Couldn't wait to get here, felt like I was coming home."

"We have a lot of catching up to do, Theodore, and not a lot of time to do it, I'm afraid. I'm a sick man, son. I've already hung on longer than the doctors expected. The best doctors money can buy and all it gets me is a death sentence."

"Don't count yourself out. I never listened to a doctor in my life and I'm no worse for wear."

"I like your spirit. I'll keep it in mind."

He took a fast gulp of Bourbon and stood, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Why doesn't Miss Neuhardt give you the tour and show you to your room. I'll rest and meet you for dinner. I believe Miss Neuhardt is preparing her famous duck and I'm sure you won't be disappointed."

"I'm sure I won't, not with my appetite."

"Good."

The old bird could hardly contain himself. These rich old hawks were so full of themselves, so full of false pride, you could pump them up with hot air until they floated away like a big round balloon. They never got their fill.

I had him eating out of my hand. I could taste the green already.

I grabbed the suitcases from the car and Amanda led me upstairs. The staircase was wide at the bottom and narrowed near the top. I found myself behind her again and if my hands weren't full, I would have carried her over the threshold.

"What kind of game are you playing here, honey," I asked?

We were in my room and I closed the door behind me. If looks could kill, I would have been dead where I stood. Her eyes were like daggers aimed at my heart. She opened a window, turned on a light and kept her mouth zipped.

"I'm just trying to figure out what the deal is. This is no kind of job for a woman

of your...capabilities. I can't believe there's anything going on between you and the old man. So you're here for the payoff. Nothing wrong with that."

She stood near the bed with her arms folded. Her head was cocked a little to the right. Her eyes squinted like she couldn't get me into focus. I strolled slowly toward her with my hand out like I was making friends with a stray dog.

"I don't blame you one bit and I won't stand in your way. You'll get what you have coming to you. Tell me if I'm wrong."

She was frozen, her eyes cold and fixed on mine. When I reached her, we stood face to face, her lips taut and stern. For a second I thought she would smile or spit, it was hard to tell. I pushed her down onto the bed and fell on top of her. She was stiff but didn't fight. I kissed her neck and pushed up her sweater. She couldn't have stopped me if she tried.

I'll admit that Amanda and I got off to a cool start but she warmed up and we finished strong. The old man didn't get around much and I had her in every room, on every piece of furniture in the place. Amanda would serve us lunch and clean up while he and I talked like two respected members of the good old boys club. He'd have his nap and I'd chase her around.

Everything was falling into place but I was getting impatient. I was starting to feel like the butler to Amanda's maid. This old dude could hang on for years.

I finally came out with it, put the proposition to her like a business deal. If she put a little something in his soup, it might speed things along. There was no sense in delaying the inevitable. The sooner we planted the old guy, the sooner we'd have our dough. She couldn't help but see it my way. I was surprised she hadn't thought of it first.

I didn't say anything more about it and every day old Mr. Solomon grew paler and weaker. She was one of those slow workers, but steady, always planning one move ahead. That's what I liked about her, she could think on her feet, wasn't bad on her back either.

We kept on consummating our relationship, like a couple of newlyweds in the honeymoon suite until we came down one day and found him on the floor, like a fish out of water, gasping for breadth.

We held hands and watched him flop around. He must have known we were there. He made one last attempt to stand and collapsed. I poured myself a drink, toasted his memory and checked his pulse. He had gone to meet his maker and knowing old man Solomon, he was going first class.

We settled the will in a week, were married in a month and were off cruising the world. We walked aboard the Caribbean Queen in New York City, man and wife, and sailed south, stopping in Antigua, Bermuda and on to the South American coast. We were Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Plisinski, young, beautiful and rich.

We drank champagne all day and all night and every time she raised her glass the rock on her finger sparkled like the North Star. It was nine karats of the most flawless diamond this side of the Atlantic. I chased her around the cabin, peeling every stitch of clothes off her every chance I got and I got plenty of chances but the ring never came off. I made sure of that.

After that first week, I never wanted to see dry land again. We slowed down a little, long enough grab a meal in the restaurant and catch a show. Amanda would try to cool me off with a late night walk on deck. She'd light a cigarette and stare into the night sky. I was usually pretty tanked by then, had only one thing on my mind and it

wasn't a stroll under the stars.

"Where do you think we'd be if you and I never met," she asked?

"You mean if me and Teddy Plisinki never met."

"Be serious."

"I mean it. You already had a pretty good thing going before I got there. I've seen girls marry those sick old guys right before they kick off and come away smelling like a rose."

"And where would you be?"

"I'd be trying to keep warm in some jail cell."

"Are you saying, I would have been better off without you."

She slid her hand inside my jacket and buried her face in my neck. I felt her tongue slide across my skin like a snake. I leaned back against the railing. Her hands moved down my body. I could hear her breathing, letting out little moans like a hungry kitten. It felt like I was floating.

With her head against my chest and her hands on my shoulders, she pushed me backwards. Her strength took me by surprise. I hit the cold water and went under. I struggled to the surface, spit salt water like a hooked mackerel and watched the ship, my wife, my money and my life sail slowly away.

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