

## Mr. Lucky's Chicken Ranch

Two pairs were showing on the board—black kings and eights—and the guy was betting as if the third king was one of his down cards. The other players had dropped out leaving piles of gold chips on the table. It was just him and me. A wad of hundred dollar bills stuffed in the pocket of his shirt made him look like a high roller from Texas. My pair of aces wouldn't beat his full house—if he had it.

I needed to know what he had hidden so I stared at the back of his cards seeing the red circles and squares touch each other. Then I bugged my eyes, slid the lids back a hair and I could see the innards of his cards. Shiny balls of light came out of the dark like the Miller Beer sign. Between the balls of light it was solid black and I knew from a TV show I saw on the atom bomb that I was looking inside of them cards at atoms.

Scary! You could get lost in there so I moved my eyes until I could see out the other side. No kings or eights.. Just an ace and a five. Garbage.

The room spun as I looked at that poor bastard betting like he owned the casino. I raised his bet, he raised me, and then I pushed forward every chip I had on the table. He folded and I pulled the whole pot towards me, all those chips. Thousands of dollars. I couldn't lose.

They call me Mr. Lucky, but until last year I couldn't win for losing. No one would have bet a plugged nickel on my chances. There I was sitting in a little card house called Pete's Poker Palace in Minden, Nevada waiting for my luck to change. I had me a good stake-- \$342 from my social security check and I knew I was going to win back part of the thousand dollars I owed Pete. I got dealt one sorry hand after another. I should have quit but I got to sweating so hard that I stuck to the back of the chair. My stake was gone in less than an hour.

The next thing I bet was my month's rent at the St. George Hotel. I lost to a pair of nines. Then I used up the ninety-eight bucks I was saving to fix the muffler on my Chevy Cavalier. I said fuck it all and bet every dime I had calling some old Basque sheepherder's bluff. I couldn't believe it—he actually had three fives. That was it for me except my secret stash—a twenty dollar bill that I keep in my right shoe. The one time I tried to bet it the cashier wouldn't take the money. She said she wasn't going to stink up her cash register.

So I left the Poker Palace on a quarter tank of gas and drove south on Highway 385 to the west fork of Walker Creek. That's where I go when I want to blow my brains out. I have a Colt special I keep under the seat with one bullet left in the chamber, the Silver Bullet. Just knowing I had it was a comfort. I parked on the other side of the bridge, stuck the pistol in my jeans and headed upstream on a little path that was easy on these legs of mine.

Tall sugar pines fill up the sides of the valley. Clumps of mesquite grow along the creek in the dry yellow grass. Willow trees and cottonwoods root along the banks. The

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eastern slopes of the Sierras are just a few miles away and the runoff water is full of dirty snowmelt.

I'd come here when I was down to my stash. I'd walk away from the highway, away from the rented room in the St. George Hotel full of beaver magazines and old boxes of take out. Away from Pete's Poker Palace that was sucking the living blood out of my sorry ass. I'd walk until the chain saw of my mind was in the off position.

It was a friggin' hot day under a pale blue sky with a couple of red tail hawks circling in the high distance. The sound of water was cool as the call of a mourning dove. Gradually my head cleared and I began to look for a bend in the river where I could light up and watch the leaves float past.

Sitting against the trunk of the cottonwood tree I finally started to feel good. I had a full pack and the little gun rested in my lap—my two best friends, Joe Camel and Mr. Bullet. I watched a little ant crawl up a stalk of yellow grass. What's he doing? How's the view from the top? Who cares? Am I going to kill myself? I don't know. What I do know is that it's peaceful here.

All of a sudden the sun vanished behind a bank of gray clouds. Most clouds drop their load of water on the western side of the Sierras but once in a while a big storm will sail right over the top and it will rain like hell. In minutes, water was bucketing down on the dusty earth making mud balls the size of buckshot all heading my way.

"Goddamnit!" I yelled. By the time I got up my pants were wet. I turned down the trail when a flash of lightning hit the top of the cottonwood tree above me. At the same time I heard a crack like a bullwhip and an arc of fire shot down the trunk in a fizzing white stream that jumped sideways along a branch over my head. It felt like a flamethrower had dug a tunnel through my skull bone and out the other side.

When I came to I was lying under the tree. The sky was blue and the tree trunk was a smoking piece of charcoal. I had the mother of all headaches and my hand looked like a piece of rib-eye steak a dog had chewed on. My gun was a glob of melted metal in the grass. I felt like all eighteen wheels of a Peterbilt truck had run me over one at a time.

I staggered down the path, my clothes in burnt shreds. Balls of light circled around me. Little blue fires whizzed past. Shooting stars came at me like someone was aiming to knock my head off. It was like being inside a Roman candle on the fourth of July. I got so dizzy I puked until there was nothing left but yellow bile plugging up my nose. Then I fell into Walker Creek.

I sat there leaning back on my hands with my legs stretched out in front of me. Muddy water came up to my chest. I heard insect sounds and a family of quail pecking along the bank. After awhile the sun shining on the water made me squint my eyes and I found myself watching lights buzz around me like a swarm of bees in a honey tree.

Then I squinted again and I saw the creek running past me. You know what happens when you tilt a photograph with a piece of glass over it. The picture goes away and you see your reflection. I could make the water disappear by scrooching up my eyes and then the fireballs would chase around each other. I pushed my eyes through the blinking lights and I came to a different place where the fireballs were slow dancing. I scrooched again

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and I was seeing rocks and old sticks and cans and stuff. Man, this was something else. I could look through that muddy water and see the bottom of the creek.

I must have passed out again because the next thing I felt was a snoot full of water and I'm choking like a sonofabitch. The water pushed me under and shoved me downstream, my back scraping the river bottom and bashing me against the banks. I finally grabbed hold of a willow tree and stuck my head up in the air. I was clawed raw and wet as a drowned rat. Damn those fireballs!

It took me a couple of minutes to get out of the water. Finally I got up and gimped down the path with my teeth clattering like I had the yellow malaria.

When I got to the Chevy Cavalier I rested in the suicide seat and took stock. I was soakin' wet. I was hurt. My car didn't run good and I was broke. I had a piss-poor hand and it was time to cash in my chips but Mr. Bullet couldn't help me now. Lightning had cooked his goose.

I sat there for a long time. Finally I rummaged around in the glove compartment hoping to find an old cigarette that had fallen out of a pack. No luck—just a deck of cards. I was as lowly as I had ever been.

I started in to play solitaire. I was looking at the back of the cards when I squinted my eyes. Quick as Jack Robinson I found myself watching the whizzing lights fly by. I heard an electrical whir like a real quiet Westinghouse refrigerator.

I gotta get out of here, I told myself, so I pushed my eyes through the fireballs like walking between glass beads. And then I blinked and sweet Jesus! I found myself staring at the FOUR OF DIAMONDS! And that frigging four of diamonds was a down card! I tried it again, then I went through the whole pack of cards, reading them one at a time with their faces down. I could read every single one of them down cards clear as day. I had hit the jackpot.

In less than an hour I drove hell-bent up to Stateline, Nevada where they got the big casinos. I put on my clean shirt I keep in the back seat for emergencies and changed the stash in my right shoe at the Bank of America. In Harrah's Club I plunked down the twenty spot for dollar chips. I didn't lose a single hand. If I had good cards I bet 'em up. When I didn't have the cards I folded. When I had a thousand dollars I moved across the casino to where the big guys play. I couldn't lose.

I walked out of Harrah's a rich man. More money than I'd ever held in my whole life. I bought myself a pale green polyester suit and alligator shoes. I wanted one of them gold chains to go around my neck but I was so tired I checked into the Holiday Hilton, paid cash for the King Suite and slept like a million dollars.

In the morning I put on my brand new threads and sauntered down the main drag to the Royal Barber Shop. I called for a trim and a manicure and told the man to color up my gray with Grecian Formula. Then I lay back with the sheet draped around my neck. I was about to doze off when right over the barber's shoulder Miss September started giving me the eye. She was pretty as a picture setting on a saddle, her leather skirt way up past her knees. Each hand was holding up one of her cantaloupes. *Hoo-eee!!!* I'd sure like one of those in my fruit salad. I tipped the barber a ten spot and crossed the street to the Kit-Kat Message Parlor. I had been here once before after I won a pot on a high diamond flush. Upstairs a big Swedish lady sat behind the counter.

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I flashed my wad and her eyes opened wide.

"Ok, I call Dimples," she said. "Vun hour of sveet luff cost two hundred dolar. Op front."

So I forked over my two hundred and she led me down the hall to a little room in back that smelled of toilet deodorant. There was a double bed with a purple sheet stretched over it and a VCR with a couple of porn videos that I had already seen. I lay down in the BarcaLounger recliner and smoked a cigarette. I had all the time in the world.

I was in heaven sitting there in my brand new hundred forty-nine dollar suit from Wal-Mart. My nails were manicured, my hair was styled, and I had a flagpole in my pants. Best of all I knew that for the rest of my life I didn't have to do anything but play cards and rake in the chips. I planned to dump the Chevy Cavalier and buy me a brand new Ford Mustang. Maybe take a trip to Hawaii and check out those island babes.

Finally, my dream girl came in.

"I'm Dimples," she said. "Glad to meetcha."

She was my type of gal. I don't like 'em too young. They're real picky then. Act like they're doing you a favor. Dimples was about thirty-five with platinum blonde hair that dropped to her shoulders. She was wearing a skirt so tight she could only take baby steps.

"These high heels are killing me," Dimples said. "Mind if I take 'em off?" She sat down on the bed patting the sheet beside her. "What's your pleasure?"

Already I liked Dimples. Treated me like a real man instead of some old codger.

"Geez, let me think. How about you take your clothes off and I watch? That'll rev up the old engine."

"You're in charge, lover." She started to unbutton her white see-through blouse. "Get a load of what I've got."

She had somethin' alright. It was boobs, all pushed up and separated in one of those Wonder Bras that I like to study in the newspaper ads. They were on sale at Wal-Mart for \$21.95 in lingerie.

Then, real slow, Dimples unhooked her bra and tossed it on the dresser with the white cups up like twin Snow-Cones. She stood up and her tits stared at me like the two brown eyes of God.

"Holy mackerel!" I yelled, jumping out of the BarcaLounger and fastening my mouth on her nipple like a suckerfish.

"Easy, old boy," she said. "Bite too hard and I'll spank your little behind."

While I was slurping away like a hog at four o'clock feeding, Dimples jammed her tongue in my ear, a lickin' and a clickin' like the old Southern Pacific shooting down the tracks between Reno and Las Vegas. She scratched her long red nails on the side of my neck and growled like a kitty cat. "*Grrrrr, grrrr. Meow.*" My hands were around her ass and my nose was mashed into her breasts and I thought I was breathing marshmallows dipped in talcum powder. Something in my pants was growing like Jack and the Beanstalk.

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Dimples grabbed my beanstalk and pulled me down on the bed. Her skirt came off like greased lightning and she wasn't wearing underwear so I had me a bird's eye view of the Promised Land. Pretty soon I was plowing away, poking and a stroking until Bingo! I let loose with a wad that's been plugging me up for forty years. We just kept on a going. Up and down, turned around, every which way. My pecker was hard as a rod. I had lead in my pencil to spare. This senior citizen was not ready for the roundup.

Towards lunchtime Dimples put on her clothes. "I got to work, Baby," she said. "You come see me Sundays. On the house."

Now you know why they call me Mr. Lucky. I can't lose. I got a world-class penthouse at Harrah's Club with two walk-in closets full of clothes. I play cards just enough to live high on the hog. But playing cards when you always pull in the chips aint the fun it used to be. Of course, I got Dimples—she's a hoot. And then there's Marge and Becky and Irma and Dolores. Hell, I got a string of ladies and a Ford Bronco and a gold chain around my neck. But you know what I'm doing that keeps up my interest? You'd be surprised.

My laboratory.

I bought me a real nice place out in the desert. A ranch house with a corral and a swimming pool and air conditioning and a picture window with a million dollar view. In the basement I had me built a deluxe laboratory with white tiles, stainless steel sinks, titanium cages, and electrical machines. I got chickens there, thousands of chickens, and I sit in my laboratory all day firing electricity into their heads. I figure everybody needs that hole between the two sides of the brain. Once you got it you can have sex forever and never peter out. That's the come along. Guys will go for that.

But that aint the important thing. See, it's getting down there with them atoms that counts. Once you're down there you can change things, fix 'em up. Just like you pry off the top of a slot machine when it's on the blink. Solder a few wire, replace your fuses, and you got a machine good as new.

Well. I'm good as new.

My skin is smooth as a baby's bottom. I got bulging biceps and the legs of a rodeo rider. The ladies all think I'm about twenty-five years old and cute as the dickens. If I can just figure out the right place to shoot that electricity through your brain you too can have immortal life. In the meantime, come on down to Mr. Lucky's Chicken Ranch. There's always plenty of fryers on sale.

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