

# Sooner or Later

## A royal flush

beat a straight flush. That much she remembered. She stared at the brightly lit computer screen and concentrated on the cards. It had been fifteen years since Sarah Ann Muskie had pondered a poker hand, an eternity since she had horned her way into her brother's Saturday night card games. She had been a good player back then. She'd had a great poker face. Now, though, as she waited in Smith's Laundromat for her clothes to dry, she wondered if she could still pull it off. She hadn't felt very lucky since her father's accident. Somehow her luck had changed. In the laundromat window, she could make out the image of a lunatic in sweat pants pounding on a brightly colored glass box, inserting quarter after quarter, murmuring "come on, baby" like some game-crazed kid. It was important to win. Since she had quit sitting in on her brother's games, she had become acquainted with the indignity of losing.

Against a machine, a great poker face was wasted. No matter how wily her strategy or deceptive her body language, she remained far more scrutable than her cold and calculating electronic opponent. In the eyes of the Bally's Electro-Sands Deluxe, she was just another sucker playing five card draw. The machine didn't know her history. It knew only that she had some quarters, and that it had been programmed to separate her from them. So it was doing that. So far it taken forty-four. While the Electro-Sands reset itself to

## Bonneville Stories

34

deal a new hand, it flashed little messages across its screen: *Why not try again? Momma needs a new pair of shoes! Forty-fifth time is the charm!* Laundry was getting expensive. But one royal flush, Sarah thought, would fix everything. One hot hand would negate all the losing.

Her father had run up against the equivalent of a royal flush — or maybe it was four aces — on that gusty spring Saturday, years ago, when Sarah was in grade school. He had taken her to the school playground to fly her new kite. Everything had gone swimmingly until, in an instant, a perfectly played cosmic hand had taken her father's last dime. Just like that. The memory of him lying motionlessly on the ground, like a stone in the spring breeze, remained fresh in her senses. Nothing — not the court settlement, not the public outcry — had been able to console her. As a nine-year-old girl, she occasionally had wondered about the meaning of life. She hadn't expected to understand it so soon.

She pumped another quarter into the Electro-Sands. A pair of twos. Great. She highlighted the other cards in her hand — the three of clubs, the eight of diamonds, and the five of spades — with the machine's electronic cursor, and pressed the big, red button on the console labeled "HIT ME." She frowned. Three of spades, eight of clubs, five of hearts. Again. She pounded the big, blue button labeled "FOLD." In a show of compassion, the Electro-Sands spat out her quarter and flashed: *No pain, no gain! Take a walk on the wild side! Forty-sixth time is the charm!* Sarah dropped the quarter back into the slot. Three jacks — that was more like it. She highlighted the other cards — a nine and a three — and whacked the "HIT ME" button. A pair of sevens... a full house! She struck the green "RAISE YA" button and inserted another

**Sooner or Later****35**

quarter. *Call*, replied the machine's little LED display. "RAISE YA," she repeated, inserting a third quarter. *Call*. "RAISE YA." The screen flashed. Sarah groaned. The Bally's Electro-Sands Deluxe had four twos. She kicked the steel pedestal.

"You're rigged!" she barked. "You cheat!"

A placard on the side of the machine read, "Bally's patented algorithms guarantee a realistic poker experience. The probability of certain combinations has been adjusted to protect vendor investment." Sarah wondered just how much the manufacturer had tipped the scales in his favor. Winning *was* possible, though — she knew that. An old lady had walked out of here a while back with 290 quarters in her laundry bag. And she had seen a little kid in a Mets cap pocket twenty quarters just last week. So it was just a matter of time. Sooner or later there would be a payoff.

Payoffs of all kinds, good and bad, were mathematically inevitable. One day everyone ended up at the right place at the right time, or the wrong place at the wrong time, or simply at the indifferent place at the irrelevant time. Sooner or later all possible scenarios came to pass. Eventually every conceivable sequence of events played itself out, somewhere. If she lived long enough — ten thousand, twenty thousand years — she would be a lottery winner. Or she would end up flattened by a double decker tour bus in her own driveway. Ultimately both possibilities would become reality. One simply hoped that lottery winnings preceded grisly traffic mishaps.

Of course her father's hopes had been dashed. As he had stood in the May sunshine on that idyllic day, taking in the cool, crisp suburban air, passing an afternoon with his little daughter, he

## Bonneville Stories

36

had cocked his head in recognition of a loud buzzing sound. As the sound had grown louder, he had looked up, down, left, right... Sarah still remembered his look of puzzlement. She had watched it modulate from bemusement to terror. She had watched it disappear. She had watched as a crowd formed on the dusty playground and stared at the gruesome sight.

Her father, so young, so vibrant, “so full of life” as almost everyone would eventually say, had been struck square in the chest by a shiny, propeller-driven aircraft with a wingspan of roughly four feet. The radio-controlled device had soared irreverently off course and out of the range of its master. Kickball games stopped. Jump ropes fell still. Kids ran off to tell their parents.

Sarah was taken aside by the paramedics, and then shielded by the police, and then finally sheltered from the curious throng by a grim-faced team comprised of her brother, her Aunt Jenny and the next-door neighbors. Their valiant efforts fell short, however, of keeping Sarah away from the newspapers and the television, which latched on to her father’s story with the sort of fervor generally reserved by piranhas for goats. Reporters and cameramen and ink-stained freelancers camped out in the street in front of her house, knocking on the front door occasionally, watching her turn out her bedroom light every night, conducting endless interviews with the neighbors. *Do you think, they posited, that there oughtta be a law?*

Sarah didn’t think so. She was pretty sure that it was idiots, and not planes, that were the problem.

She pulled her clothes out of the dryer. She still had one quarter left in her purse. It was calling to her. *Set me free, sister! What am*

**Sooner or Later****37**

*I gonna get ya — a gumball?* She withdrew the coin from her bag. The Bally's Electro-Sands Deluxe blinked invitingly. An imaginary inevitability presented itself: the last coin in a change purse, like the last card in a poker deck, was a known quantity. Since none of the other quarters were winners, this one, by process of elimination, had to be the ace of spades.

She slipped it into the slot. The screen flashed: *six of hearts, nine of spades, queen of hearts, three of clubs, four of hearts*. She highlighted the three, the four, and the six, and slapped the "HIT ME" button. Zip. She frowned and pressed "FOLD." The machine flashed its usual encouragement. It did seem to care about her.

She glanced at her watch. It was almost time for *Wheel of Fortune*. It was the one show she never missed. She folded her blouses and skirts and underwear, and stacked them neatly in the basket.

Vanna White's was the unlikeliest of success stories. Raised in a small southern town, she had bolted to Hollywood after graduating high school, fueled by dreams of stardom and consumed, no doubt, by expectations that she would be "discovered" by Aaron Spelling, or by a Zanuck, as she sipped a malted at some Beverly Hills soda fountain. Like the thousands of other young girls who flocked to the glitter mecca, she sought to escape the tedium of her humble beginnings by reinventing herself as someone interesting. Her lack of experience was immaterial. Besides, anything would be better than a retreat to her hometown. So she auditioned for commercials. She worked as an extra. She took bit parts in dinner theater. And then one day, as she stood in a long line of young

## Bonneville Stories

38

women bucking to become game show hostesses, she caught the eye of the TV mogul Merv Griffin. He was struck, he was to explain later, by her large head. Famous people, he noted, often had very large heads. The rest was soon history.

Sarah ruminated on Vanna's breathtaking trajectory, on the way in which she had thrown herself to the wolves only to become their lord and master. Sarah figured that for every Vanna White out there, for every Farrah Fawcett or Tracey Gold or Rula Lenska, there was an equal and opposite phenomenon, a ravishing beauty flattened by a municipal bus. It was brutal. The sheer mathematical nature of it was unmistakable. Sometimes the dice came up odd and sometimes they came up even, sometimes boxcars, sometimes snake eyes. There was no explaining it except to say that in the grand scheme, taking all hopeful dice throwers into account, one simply rolled what one was due to roll. And that was that. Sarah thought of the old woman who had taken 290 quarters from the Electro-Sands Deluxe. That biddy, she figured, was due.

She turned on the TV. The game show host, once a dapper and smiling failure on the talk show circuit, was now an everyday witness to elation and heartbreak on *Wheel of Fortune*. Yet he never seemed fatigued. It was all in a day's work for him — sore losers, gloating winners, good guessers, folks who choked on an obvious puzzle solved by the entire audience. No doubt he understood that each of those game show stereotypes would appear with more or less predictable frequency, that a string of lackluster contestants would likely be followed by a similar stream of witty ones. Some would win, some would lose, and still others would be shot at by snipers on the freeway on their way home.

**Sooner or Later****39**

And of those who drew gunfire while passing beneath an underpass, some would hear it riddle the fenders, some would watch it glance menacingly off the safety glass, and still others would take it square in the skull. And of those who took lead to the head, some would manage to wobble to the shoulder while others would vault the median strip and touch off ghastly multiple car pile-ups. A big Electro-Sands in the sky dealt the cosmic hand, and the oblivious motorist, bobbing his head to the beat of the radio, played the cards to the best of his inability. At the end of his drive, he found himself either safe at home, marooned on the side of the road, or pinned beneath his steering wheel as the jaws of life poked and prodded and finally cut him loose from the wreckage.

Fortunately the chances of being struck by sniper fire were relatively slim. It was far more likely that one would simply draw a speeding ticket, or blow a tire, or take the wrong exit and end up somewhere in New Jersey. It was more likely that one would find cloying Celine Dion songs playing simultaneously on three different metropolitan stations. It was even more likely that one would catch a glimpse of the President taking his jog through Rock Creek Park. It was probably many times less likely, of course, that one would hit the multimillion-dollar PowerBall jackpot. The winner of such a bonanza generally wore an expression of utter incredulity, dazed, speechless, caught by fate like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck. It was clear that such mind-numbingly lucky individuals understood their situation perfectly. They had run unwittingly through their reservoir of good fortune. Their remaining days on Earth would be hell.

Sarah considered the complexity of karma, and wondered if

## Bonneville Stories

40

she had inherited any star-crossed traits from her poor, mutilated father. Surely factors other than pure chance played their mystical roles in the course of fate; surely one's beliefs and suspicions invited or discouraged, to some degree, happenstance. Nothing great, she observed, ever seemed to happen to cynics. She wondered if her father's guilt, accumulating all those years in airports and conference rooms and company cars, didn't draw that miniature Cessna to his heart like shavings to a magnet.

For better or worse, she believed in her own good luck. If she was right about the magnetic properties of her father's penitent heart, then it stood to reason that in time she would defy the odds at the laundromat. One day she would throw open a pillowcase to contain the flood of shimmering coins rushing out of the Electro-Sands Deluxe.

Vanna White waved goodbye. Sarah walked to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of Gallo Blush Wine. She popped the cork and filled an enormous thermal Taco Bell cup to the brim.

The hours passed quickly. Episodes of *Friends* and *The West Wing* and *Dateline NBC* bounced by Sarah's droopy eyes like strangely inept commercials, coaxing her to buy, or buy into, something. The wine ran over her tongue, down her throat, and into her warm, awaiting belly, giving her an unprecedented affection for the likes of Stone Phillips. Occasionally she gazed at the ceiling, studying its stucco motif, remarking to herself upon its uniqueness. The pattern was singular, like a rush of snowflakes or a winning PowerBall combination.

Sarah dozed off on the sofa, the Taco Bell cup perched pre-



**Sooner or Later****41**

cariouly on her pelvis, the TV belching bits of data on a rockslide in southern California. She snored. At 11:15, though, as if on cue, Sarah stirred and grabbed a scrap of paper from the nearby end table. On it were printed the numbers 06, 09, 11, 23, 34 and, in red ink, 52. The first five were her standard PowerBall choices, and the one in red could increase her winnings tenfold. Onscreen a procession of rubber balls was falling, one by one, out of a huge, rotating plexiglas drum. As the little balls came to rest at the end of a long, thin tube, Sarah squinted at the winning combination: "05-08-10-22-33/51."

She gasped.

Unbelievably, impossibly, every number in the winning combination was equal to every number in her own combination — *minus one*. Her eyes burned. Her teeth ground spastically. The complexity of karma, the possibility of its genetic passage from generation to generation, rattled her insides like the clamor of a great, Mongolian gong. The chances of hitting the PowerBall jackpot, she knew, were roughly one in eighty million. And the odds of hitting it *minus one* were exactly the same. The only difference, of course, was that while the evening's winning numbers were worth roughly thirty-five million dollars, her equally stunning combination was worth nothing at all. Her mathematical miracle wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

She kicked the coffee table, delivered a flurry of hooks and jabs to the sofa, and emitted, like a doberman barking at an ice cream truck, a series of ferocious epithets. For the second time in her life, blind optimism had revealed itself as the most ludicrous philosophy imaginable. Foolhardy attempts at looking on the bright side yield-

## Bonneville Stories

42

ed only vistas of perfect, unbroken blackness. Fate had her number. The PowerBall jackpot, like everything else in her life, was just another out-of-control miniature Cessna.

She knew what she had to do. She ran upstairs to her bedroom, hurdled her bed, and jerked open the top drawer of her bureau. And there it was. There, in the left, back corner of her underwear drawer, wrapped in cheesecloth, sat her security, her insurance, her vintage Clint Eastwood-*Dirty Harry* revolver. Her father had left it to her in his will. Now she knew why. She grabbed the box of slugs, eased open the pistol's well-oiled cylinder and methodically inserted a single, flat-nosed .44 caliber shell into one of the chambers. If Providence wanted to play games, she would play.

The room spun. Like the addictive roll of the lemons and oranges in the Atlantic City slots, like the teasing gyration of the aces and kings and queens in the Bally's Electro-Sands Deluxe, like the enticing whirl of her beloved Wheel of Fortune, the room spun and spun, until the ceiling fan was a vicious airplane propeller, until her skull was a sphere in the mirror on her bureau, until the .44 Magnum in her hand became, finally, a roulette wheel. She spun the cylinder. *Momma needs a new pair of shoes.* She lifted the pistol to her temple but then reconsidered, relocating the tip of the barrel to a spot over her left breast, against her beating heart. *Click.* Nothing. She laughed. *Click.* Silence. She wiped the sweat from her forehead. *Click.* Again, nothing. She pressed the gun insistently into her chest. *Click.* Nothing but the whirl of the ceiling fan. She smirked. Then, once more, as life and death loomed before her, fifty-fifty, she pulled the trigger. Nothing. Just salient, pure and silent anticlimax. She caught her face in the mirror. It had regained

**Sooner or Later**

its human shape.

She was smiling.

**43**

The Bally's Electro-Sands Deluxe was just as she had left it, blinking, dinging, and winking its way into the heart of the empty, well-lit laundromat. Sarah frequently washed her clothes at this time of night, after David Letterman had signed off, when she could face down her Machiavellian opponent unimpeded, free of the cold stares of other patrons. Her relationship with the machine, after all, was personal. Interacting with it in the presence of outsiders was practically akin to engaging in sexual intercourse, Rita and John Jenrette-like, on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. It wasn't her style to share that kind of intimacy with strangers. She reached into her pillowcase and pulled out the revolver, still warm, and stroked its barrel. The vague aroma of gunpowder wafted through the air like the scent of blueberry muffins — the kind her mother used to make, the kind her father used to love to eat.

Sarah sighed. Fate was cyclical. Misfortune visited the same names, the same numbers, the same heads, again and again, time after time. Sooner or later, certain people, somehow blessed, won the lottery a second, or even a third, time, while others, snakebitten, never won it at all. Sarah felt the butt of the gun in her palm. Sarcastically she mimicked the energetic machine, blinking her eyes frenetically, hissing like a snake. Then, in a voice that she believed approximated that of the Electro-Sands, she blurted her own message of encouragement.

*You always hurt the one you love.*

The machine's transparent case, gleaming confidently beneath

## Bonneville Stories

44

the fluorescent lights, somehow caught her poised reflection, a silhouette of Harry Callahan in sweats, milliseconds before erupting into thousands of shards of jagged glass. Sarah flinched. The machine emitted a series of throaty gasps, like a great, black bear gunned down by some plaid-capped lunatic, spewing sparks, doubling over in profound short circuitry. Like Roy Hobbs in *The Natural*, deserted by his gift as well as by his good fortune, Sarah had transcended the odds. Her aim and timing were flawless. She had shot out the lights.

The Electro-Sands Deluxe, prone on the floor of the laundromat, tasting dust like a dying cowboy in some spaghetti western, belched loudly, as if to utter for the annals some famous last words. As the lights above flickered in mild brownout, Sarah caught the machine's eloquent final remarks, made in the form of hundreds of liberated quarters rushing from its fractured pedestal. Her pillowcase, the one she always brought with her, the one that always remained empty, swelled with righteous pleasure.

Consumed by relief, the young woman examined the ghostly image moving in the front window. She watched intently as her expressionless countenance, her sublimely honed poker face, burst into a mischievous grin. That biddy, she concluded with the self-satisfaction common to the fortunate, was due.

\*