

The Run



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I once interviewed a rock-star who described making a hit and then performing it on-stage as feeling like you owned the world. Not in a greedy, egotistical way, more a sense of complete, mutual awe, of majesty: *utter humanness and pure love connecting with cosmic energy*- I believe he said. He said that when a hit comes to you, when you're walking around, or taking a 'schvitz' and maybe the tune starts in your head, or the poem which would become the lyrics, and you feel it then, a tingling, a sensation: *this is hot*- and you start to work it out on the piano or guitar, and then when you actually cut it and: *hear it tight*- for the first time, that's when you get the rush. But *live*- and I thought this was interesting- he said it didn't have to be in a packed stadium: *doesn't have to be (expletive) Wimbledon*- as long as there were at least a couple hundred people and they were all really into it. That's all that mattered. Then you'd get the real rush, the: *full body rush*- as he called it that not only allowed you to play that same hit over and over night after night but to actually enjoy doing so.

I've been a reporter in some capacity for eleven years. My name is Dan Tillman. I started in 1984 as a sports-desk gopher/copy-guy for a TV station in Denver, and then caught on with a local free 'art rag' as a reporter and assistant editor. I was on the sports-desk writing copy for the first five-years but also doing research and occasionally some typesetting, yes, actually done on a computer way back then too but still took some work unlike today where the software basically does it for you. Not a whole lot of 'rush' in my world. I couldn't even imagine the *Holy Grail* of the 'full body rush'.

One day when I was feeling particularly crappy, broke and stifled in my low-paying world, I took the last bill out from my wallet besides some singles. It was older than the rest, a 'Series 1933-C', a fifty, from a time when the paper and ink seemed somewhat richer in color and definitely higher in quality. At first I thought it might not be real and that I got burned with a counterfeit since it looked different from the others, but closer examination showed that it was just older and had extra stuff printed on it like a bank's name. *Probably sat in some old lady's drawer for the better part of her life* -I thought. I walked into a casino, 'Diamond Lil's', and right up to the first blackjack table I saw and played the whole thing. This ensured I would either double my money or crap out, either outcome nice and fast. I rolled it over for five straight passes, sixteen-hundred dollars, before giving back two-hundred, then getting the hell out of there

before I gave it all back. I kept the old fifty aside and it became my lucky rabbit's foot, my talisman, folded precisely into fourths the way you fold a brochure and tucked snugly into the back of my wallet. I've used it to do some coke a couple of times.

I've always had an analytical mind and as I sat night after night and monotonously entered data, sports score after score, often right up until press time at 1:45 a.m., I began to notice trends in the number of articles I saw on say a particular football team, and how the betting line seemed to be affected. Also, a lot of those cheesy: *Dial '1-800 Sure-Win' for your pick of the night, a guaranteed winner!* –ads ran in the back of our paper. So, I developed a 'system' and found a guy named 'Buddy' (unlikely his real name) who took bookmaking action from the back of a dive-bar named 'Drake's' down in 'LoDo', the nickname for lower-downtown Denver where the nighttime action is. I wasn't earning very much at work so I couldn't afford to bet heavy but with my fourteen-hundred dollar head start started with my lucky fifty, damned if my 'system' didn't start working. After the fifth week I was pulling in more in an envelope from *Buddy* than I was from the newspaper, and spent much of my off-time reading, calling those stupid hotlines and crunching numbers even more. I thought maybe I was feeling some of that rock-star 'tingling' -when a team I needed to cover a spread scored the meaningless points that got them over and got me paid- and one time I believe a short 'full body rush' when I went for it and bet a block of five games which pays twenty-five-to-one on top of any line, and I had laid down half a yard- five hundred bucks. Paid out *twelve-and-a-half G's*. I counted the cash right when I got into my car, a stupid idea in 'LoDo' at night, then counted it again when I got back to my ratty (but *soon-to-be-distant-memory*) studio apartment. I even tried to put the whole fat roll in my front pocket, carry it around like some gangster, but this apparently only works in the movies, or maybe if you're really fat and have appropriately large pockets. The interview with the rocker was three years prior to that first big win, but I remembered his words and his description clearly as I turned the roll over and over and felt an incomparable sense of power.

My hot streak. Forever to be known as: 'The Run'. Guys down at *Drake's* tagged me 'Biff' after the 'Back to the Future' movie character who stumbles across a future sport almanac left behind accidentally from a time machine, and obviously can't lose. For a while I worried about getting mugged, especially after a cocktail or seven, but I guess I bought the degenerates enough drinks and hot wings on good nights so they couldn't

bring themselves to roll me. Plus, most of them had learned by week two to try to see what I was doing before game time and maybe get down a little on their own.

I was their fucking hero.

I can handle myself okay for a guy in his late thirties; I played outside-linebacker in high school. But cruising around late at night and half *in-the-bag* with a thick wad of cash was a recipe for trouble. My new problem, if you could call it that, was that 'Buddy' the bookie was okay for maybe a couple of hundred bucks a game but I got the feeling that he hadn't laid-off much if any of my action early on in the streak and therefore had taken the pounding himself. '*Laying off*' means passing a bet along to a bigger bookie while paying less 'juice', a bookie who can afford to pay if the bet hits, leaving the smaller bookie safely in his financial comfort zone. Smart bookmakers choose their clients carefully and then they try to lay all of the action off on someone bigger, living off the '*juice*'- the term, usually ten percent, is the bookie's cut of your winnings for taking your bet. They keep one-hundred percent if you lose. Small time guys pay the bigger bookie less, maybe five-percent juice so if they even out the bets they can't lose money. 'Buddy' maybe wasn't that smart and after two weeks of my hitting like mad and rolling it over every night he took me to meet one of his 'guys', a Chinese dude who sounded like he was from New Jersey and spoke like he wanted a part on *Miami Vice*. He told me to call him 'Charlie' as in 'Charlie Chan' but I doubted that this was his name any more than 'Buddy' was called that at first communion. 'Charlie' assigned me a client code, told me that he already knew where I lived and worked. Not sure if I remember making 'Buddy' being privy to these details but it all seemed reasonable. Settle-up day was Monday, without fail.

'Charlie' lasted for nearly three weeks, often muttering under his breath in Chinese or Mandarin or something about how I was 'killing him' as he walked away after handing me a big, fat envelope stuffed full of cash.

I couldn't lose. I was hitting nearly seventy-five percent of my plays.

I got passed up the line, again, this time to a guy named 'Mush' which may have been his real name and whose affect was straight out of *Mafia Central Casting*. By now I was on their radar, betting '*dimes*' per game (a thousand bucks). 'Mush' assured me I was the last guy I needed to meet and that he could handle any and all of my action and he hoped that I wouldn't go anywhere else.

It's impossible to have a 'system' to bet team sports unless the fix is in, and the fix is never in, at least not for small time punks like me, so I'm pretty sure they had me

checked out six ways to Sunday to be sure I wasn't 'connected', maybe to some big-time rival.

For five weeks straight I hit nearly seventy-percent of my plays and kept rolling it over. I had parlayed my initial fourteen-hundred bucks from the old fifty-dollar bill at 'Diamond Lil's' into almost half-a-million dollars.

One half-million.

Green, cash dollars.

That much cash, I'd never seen anything like it outside of a movie, and no movie could convey the smell of it, or the filth it left on your hands after counting it, nor the worry and foreboding that nothing this good could last forever, or what if you got robbed? Or, what if there was a fire?

By Monday morning, in week number nine of 'The Run' I am seriously thinking about quitting work. Don't get me wrong, I like to write.

Sort of.

Let me clarify: I like to write out interviews I've conducted if the interviewee is compelling. I've been getting mostly dull assignments lately, stuff tied in with politics, one sort of interesting piece on a corruption charge but it's November and that means college football is in action and this means there are a ton of games. Let me tell you, when you're up nearly a *half-a-mil* of house-money it is damn hard not to go crazy with it, crazy like laying ten dimes -ten grand- on some wild 25-1 parlay. I mean, what the hell, like I wouldn't be *nearly* as happy with four-hundred- ninety thou? Way I've been going, I'd probably hit that too. Having this much cash...everyone says: *Yeah, I'd like to have that problem* –but you know you can't declare it because it is *technically* illegal (all right, just regular illegal). I have been tempted to fly out to *Las Vegas* and park my ass in a sportsbook. It's funny, I never broke any law before, not counting personal consumption drug-use, and no one feels like they're breaking any laws by betting a couple of bucks on the *Superbowl* in some office pool even though *technically* they are, (that word again) but when you have nearly a half-million dollars lying in various shrink-wrapped stacks on your bed, even if it's not stolen and no one, as far as you know, is trying to kill you for it you still know it's illegal. And you have to find something to do with it or you know in the end you'll wind up gambling it all back.

I have a brother-in-law named Ted. He's married to one of my three sisters, Monica, and they have a couple of kids. Monica is the oldest, I'm the youngest. My two

other sisters are 'floaters'. One is a yoga instructor who catches on with boats and winds up on exotic islands where she'll hang out and teach for a week or a month or a year then sends me a postcard from somewhere else. The other is a boozier, and heavy into coke and meth, and only calls when she's in trouble which used to be all the time until about three years ago when she dropped off the map. Possibly incarcerated. Possibly dead, though I wouldn't bet on it as of the four of us she's by far the toughest.

So, Monica's husband Ted is a contractor. Residential homes mostly but he also does small commercial, like six to ten unit strips and stacks. He has a good business; they live up in *Boulder* in a house that until recently I wouldn't have dreamed of, and I actually spent a couple of summers in his employ swinging a hammer as a side-gig when I first got started at the TV station. I have a pretty good idea how the business works. Ted is a 'Churchie'. an incredibly straight-shooter, but almost every business that can has a skim to save on taxes and I know a lot of guys who would never dream of taking a hotel towel who think nothing of drawing good pocket-money from the till before 'Uncle Sam' gets his taste. But, like most successful, church-going businessmen, Ted sees dollars first.

"Gambling? How much?"

"A lot," I took a sip of lemonade and leaned back into a comfy lounge chair, looking up at *The Flatirons*, the distinct mountains outside of *Boulder*. My sister Monica lit a cigarette and settled into her own chair with her smoke and a glass of iced tea. I'd decided to run my idea by her first.

We grew up lower-middle class; dad had been a truck driver before dying from lung cancer at forty-nine, and mom a substitute teacher who died herself at fifty under questionable circumstances, probably suicide. Monica had taken a real liking to the trappings of *Boulder* where homes averaged more than half-a-million and every other car was a high-end import. I thought their kids, my nieces, were spoiled little brat-snobs, but that's for another day.

"A lot like five-grand?"

It was always interesting to see what was 'a lot' of money, for me, the lowly writer to have in his possession, coming from someone who lives in a million-dollar home and probably has five-grand in change under the cushions of one of her sofas.

I smiled thinly. "More like five-hundred."

Monica scoffed dismissively then took a long draw off of her skinny cigarette. I don't think many people smoke in *Boulder*, it being all outdoorsy and all. She was about

to make a crack about how no one's time was worth discussing over five-hundred dollars while trying not to be *too* pretentious when she seemed to process rapidly and then cocked an eye. "Five-hundred *grand*?" I nodded once. *Mr. Cool*. "You won half-a-million dollars gambling? Are you freaking kidding me?"

"Nope."

"Where? How? *Vegas*?"

I told her about my roll. Monica doesn't impress easily. And, believe me this is not exactly found money, I did earn it, but she acted like I'd discovered buried treasure or something.

"So now you have five-hundred thousand dollars lying around? Where is it? Can I see it? What if someone steals it?"

"Calm down. Why do you think I'm here? It's a shitload of money. I have it stashed away at work. They have 24-hour security, and there are always people around."

"Wow."

"Right."

"Well, what are you going to do with it?"

I didn't particularly like having to connect the dots for her. "I was going to talk to Ted."

"Ted? Why Ted? He's no financial planner."

"It's illegal gambling winnings, Monica. As in 'not legal'. As in 'I paid no taxes on them'. If I won it in a sportsbook in *Vegas* the tax man would have taken his bite before I got out of the casino."

"So, you want Ted to sell you a home for cash? Is that it?"

Hadn't thought about that angle but at least we'd crossed a threshold where I figured she wouldn't get pissed off that I would even ask. I thought for a moment about how to put it. "Ted deals with a lot of trades. Not *trading*, what I mean is..."

"I know what trades are, Danny." 'Trades' are your various carpenters and plumbers and framers and electricians. Monica always called me Danny. Thankfully since my folks passed no one else did. "You want us to help you launder the money."

Well, okay then. "Yep."

Monica took a long drag then a drink. "We paid five-point-one last filing." I forgot that Monica did the bookkeeping. "But we'd be saving you from paying six-point-nine. Plus federal of course. If you could declare it. Which, like you said, you can't."

“Obviously, I’m trying not to pay anything. It’s more about vouching for where it came from. So I could, I don’t know, start a business. Invest, whatever. Legitimately.

“Anyway, do you think I could run it by Ted? I mean, I know it’s gambling, but they are legitimate winnings. It’s not like it’s stolen or drug money or something.”

“Boy, I don’t know. Let me think about it. I mean, sure, you could run it buy him. I just don’t know if he’d be interested. Would save us close to twenty-six thousand.” I played this perfectly as I knew Monica would prime the pump with Ted once she did her own math.

“You could buy half of a new car.”

Monica ignored me. She tilted her head back in this theatrical sort of way before she smoked. “He won’t be home for a while.”

We sat and drank our drinks and looked at the incredible scenery, *The Flatirons*, the trademark skyline of *Boulder* which looked like a normal run of picturesque mountains until a giant saw blade swung from the sky and lopped off part of the rock face at a seventy-degree angle.

Monica pushed some hair away from her eyes. “So. Let me ask you. This ‘system’ of yours...”

I drove up to *Boulder* with the hope of securing a means to legitimize my winnings. I left with five-thousand more to gamble, Monica’s ‘*mad money*’ from her sock drawer.

Great.

We agreed she would feel Ted out first, and meanwhile there was another slate of games on tonight that old ‘*Mush*’ and the boys were waiting by the phones for ‘*M-two-three-seven*’ (me) to call in his action on. For all I knew, they were riding my streak too. For all I knew, half the bookies on the east coast were. I imagined some real big shot somewhere, an actual *Mafia Don*, or, what the hell, an entire *Mafia* family stewing over the pounding they were taking as at some point there have to be no bigger bookies to lay bets off to. Now, there would be a story; following the trail of my crazy run through ‘*Buddy*’ at ‘*Drake’s*’ bar, to ‘*Charlie (Chan)*’ on up to ‘*Mush*’ and beyond, everyone waiting by the phone for the one ring amongst hundreds or even thousands where the caller, me, identifies as ‘*M-two thirty seven*’ and continues to hit seventy-percent. I could see a couple of casino bosses in *Vegas* talking right now about how I’d been

background-checked thoroughly and come back squeaky-clean; how I was just some unconnected guy on the run of a lifetime, and how like a game of musical chairs at some point I'd go stone-cold and like a snake-whip so would the entire line of guys riding my coattails. How it always went that way. *But we're two months in and the guy's gotta be up a mil or more by now* –one might be saying.

I was betting fifty-grand a night, my self-imposed limit, so if I hit seventy-percent across the board I wound up with like eighteen-grand in profit after paying the 'juice'. Tonight, including Monica's five I would bet fifty-five. 'Mush' and any associates, the guys I'd bet with, knew roughly how much I'd won, just from them. But who knew if I was betting with some rival as well? Basically they knew I was being *relatively* prudent. No way that I could spread say two-hundred grand around in Denver without everyone knowing. I was waiting for an invite to *Vegas*, on a private jet, comped all the way. Then I'd know I'd made it onto the radar of a guy on top. And maybe I could interview him, hang a pseudonym on him. No need for one of those voice distorters or screens in print. I could tell him that I'd spend a weekend living in his sportsbook in return. If I couldn't get the interview maybe I could write a story about the adventures of my good-luck fifty-dollar bill.

Might make a story. Might make some story.

"So. Explain this to me will you please?"

I met Monica for lunch in *Boulder*, a feast at a place far snootier than my norm as she was undoubtedly paying after I handed her an envelope fat with cash. It had been two weeks since our last visit and her investment had now grown from five to sixteen-thousand, an eleven-thousand dollar profit.

"What? My system?"

"Yes, well that, okay, sure, but also why are you giving this back? If you keep going for a while maybe I can retire."

"Retire from what? Ted's already got you parked in a seven-figure pad, driving a brand new '95 'Range Rover'. Pretty good 'ROI' for a month, I think.

"And besides, what about *my* 'problem'? Which, by the way, has now grown another hundred-thou." I said sadly (bragged).

"You made a hundred-thousand dollars in two weeks?"

"No, I made four-hundred-thousand in two weeks. But I gave three of it back." I smiled and leaned back so the waiter could set my salad down. I explained the basics of my 'system'. "So, I figure that there's a whole lot of game-fixing going on by the guys who take all the bets. The guys at the top." I explained about '*laying off*' and paying '*juice*'. "They want as many guys as possible betting the same way on the same games week after week. They let them win a little, like maybe twenty percent of the time, so they keep coming back and forget that they lose some money eighty-percent of the time. So, I track not only the articles but also the quote guys, the 'experts' who offer 'guaranteed locks' on games, you've seen the ads, sometimes for free or for a few bucks, 'just call right now'. It's a little more complicated than that but I chart the general tendencies and then just bet against them. I'm winning about seventy-percent right now which is unheard of for this long of a run.

"Might be my system." I shrugged. "Might just be dumb luck."

Monica was holding the envelope in front of her on the table, tapping it as if she couldn't decide what to do with it. "So, you won't bet any more for your poor, poor, dear sister unless her husband agrees to help you with your money?"

"No, I just figured you'd be happy making eleven-grand. Look, my luck could turn any time and then if you lost all of it you'd be pissed."

"No. I'm a big girl..."

I held up a hand while I finished chewing. "Not so. Everyone gets mad when they lose money. This way you're happy. You can go blow ten-grand without consulting Ted. I'm still happy.

"And, if worse comes to worse, and assuming I don't become some degenerate gambler who loses it all, I can just use the cash for daily expenses." I shrugged. "Bills. Rent. Maybe take some trips and shit."

"Where's your sense of *greed*, Danny?" She smiled and ate a delicate forkful. "Why not go to *Vegas* and try to earn big money. Retirement money. Then quit. I know they take taxes out but what you had left would be legitimate. People win big in *Vegas* all the time."

"Right into the 'lion's den' eh?" I then explained my idea for a story.

Monica scoffed, a little, but warily as I had just handed her eleven-grand so maybe I knew *something*. "Danny, there are guys at casinos who bet millions a night..."

"... Right, they're called: 'whales'..."

She cocked her head. "You really think a head of a big casino would fly you out there?"

"Yup. Because *I* think that *they* think that I'm probably tapped in with one of their rivals. Who's feeding me information and they just can't figure out who it is. Bet they have someone following me right now," I said, half-jokingly, but then both of them turned our heads around slowly and looked like a couple of *rubes*.

"Okay," I continued. "Here's a possible scenario. I have a cousin in some syndicate. Some crime family, that takes in millions of dollars in book every week.

"They have people on their payroll. They have *athletes* on their payroll, and umpires and refs and shit. Okay, so remember fixing games is almost never who wins and who loses. So your average *joe-blow* fan doesn't really think a thing or get all that mad about losing his dough as long as his team wins.

"Let's say there's a line of eight in a football game. The bookies have most of the action on the favorite covering the line, the '*point spread*'. So the team wins, but they only win by a touchdown, seven points..."

"...they win the game but lose the bet. I understand that stuff."

"Okay. Right now I'm on my third bookie because I'm betting fifty-grand a night. That's way too much action for some small-time guy to take because what if he can't lay it off and then loses? Then he has to pay and if he can't he's not only out of business but has a pissed-off, possibly violent guy after him."

"And you think the next step up is the end of the line. A *Mafia Don*, or a casino boss, something like that?"

Dan shrugged. "I told you, it's just a theory. See, we also don't know how much ancillary action I'm generating either. I mean, you know, people talk. The guys I know down at the bar, they all know. Half of 'em are riding my streak right now themselves. Then they each tell two buddies and next thing you know a thousand guys are making most of the same bets every night."

"And winning."

"Right. Lately."

We ate our meals and chatted about other things.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Well," I took a toothpick to my back teeth, "I think maybe *Vegas*. Go check out that new pyramid hotel."

"The 'Luxor'?"

"Whatever."

"What if you don't get the okay for the story?"

"I will."

"Well, you're awfully cocky lately," my sister said as she slid the fat envelope discretely into her purse. "If you do wind up going will you bet for me?"

"I guess. But I don't want to hear a peep if we lose. You can only roll your profits. I'll let you know if I go."

And yes, I am feeling pretty cocky lately. And I should be. I guess maybe I should be content; more than content. I've never had anywhere near this much money in my life. But I'm chasing that *full-body rush*. And I can't sing worth a lick.

In the end convincing my boss on the story idea had been relatively easy especially since I said I wouldn't need any expense money. Of course, before I actually floated it by her I thought about it for a while then that afternoon instead of calling in my bets I went to the dry-cleaner above which there was some kind of private social club, a place where I'd met 'Mush' the first and only time in person. You had to walk through the dry cleaner to get to the stairs. That was at night when there were quite a few guys in the club, but as it was just after three in the afternoon, I had to get my bets in before the east coast games started. Denver is two hours behind. This afternoon the dry-cleaner was open as were the stores around it and I wondered if the patrons gave an evil eye to anyone they saw walking up the nondescript stairs to the 'social club' or whatever was taking place in the apartments upstairs. Even though it was broad daylight I knocked on the closed door at the top of the rise and had one of those little peep slides move and a couple of dark eyes look me over.

"What?" The man said in a thick, European accent.

"Is 'Mush' here?" I was suddenly feeling a little nervous as this was beginning to look like a movie scene where some unsuspecting *loser*, played by me, walks right into the lion's den carrying raw meat.

"What? What mush? Who are you? I don't know you. Have you been here before?"

"Uh, I'm 'M-two-three-seven'." I thought that might help. It did, not because the goon understood me but because 'Mush' himself suddenly had the door wide open and

the goon moved off to the side. 'Mush' doesn't look like any kind of *Mafioso* I'd ever seen depicted in film but more like an accountant maybe, a short-ish, thinner guy with thinning hair and a bad comb-over. But he has very intense eyes and an air that often comes from having money but something more, something hard. It shouldn't surprise me, I suppose. After all, he *is* a bookie.

"*Stoyka*. This is 'the guy'." The goon didn't appear to understand but kept quiet, standing off to the side with his hands crossed in front of him, arms bulging. "Hottest run we've seen in a long time.

"Settle up's not 'til Monday, *Sport*. And always at the coffee shop. So what do I owe this visit?"

"I've recently come into some money..."

'Mush' smiled. "Listen to this guy. He cleans my clock something like seven weeks running. Has to remind me."

I smiled back. "You know how it goes." I paused. "I want to go to *Vegas*. Thought you might know someone at a casino, maybe put in a word for me." I waited for a minute to see if he was going to counter with some crap about: *why would he know anyone in Vegas*, but instead he parried with silence so I added: "I want to go to a sportsbook where my cash won't cause any problems."

He snorted. "Cash is never a problem in *Vegas*. The whole fucking place breathes it in and shits it out. Less the skim of course." He paused again so I smiled. "So what, you think your action's gonna get to be too hot for me to handle? That it? I told you it won't be."

"No, I just want to go. Take my girl, maybe. Figured I'd ask. No big deal if it's a problem."

"Lemme think about it. Okay if I let you know on Monday?"

"I'll be waiting for my envelope," I smiled confidently. 'Mush' shrugged. "Maybe. You know I do all right."

"Every streak ends sometime, Dan." He said as I turned to leave. Then: "I'll take any action up to ten-dimes per right now, if you decide you want to ride that streak of yours a little harder."

I left without another word.

There was an envelope waiting for me Monday but it was only for six-grand; more than three months salary from the newspaper, but during '*The Run*' it almost felt like a bad

deal. Usually, this other guy met me at the coffee shop, another wiry guy (as opposed to a goon) but similar hard, black eyes to 'Mush's'. He never told me his name, only grunted: 'Mush's guy' the first time we met, but today 'Mush' showed up with the wiry guy.

'Mush' slid the envelope across the table and I nodded perfunctorily and moved it smoothly into my sport coat while I downed some bacon and eggs. 'Mush' smiled, a sort of reptilian smirk.

"'The Streak' continues. Six 'G's' this week...that would be three large per year. More than most lawyers and docs are pulling but chump change to you, Dan." I didn't really like him using my name as I only knew him as 'Mush' but I wasn't about to make any trouble.

"You too," I added a little ego stroke. "Something to eat?" I pointed with my fork at one man then the other. "On me," I said without any smugness as the two of these guys together felt more than a little dangerous. The wiry guy waved at a passing waitress and said: *can I get some coffee* -but 'Mush' didn't even look up, focusing on me while I forked down my food and deftly avoided his stare.

"You are incredibly hot my friend. I don't know how you're doing it. Maybe you know someone who gives you tips. Makes...suggestions?"

"Nope. Just flippin' a coin," I smiled, staying just above the line of possibly misinterpreted provocation.

The waitress gave the wiry guy his coffee and he poured about five sugar packs into the cup and swirled it with a spoon. 'Mush' went on: "Man could do pretty good, he followed all of your action, past couple of months. Been giving some thought to maybe going to *Vegas* myself. Sitting over your shoulder at the sportsbook, if you didn't have a problem with that."

"Honestly," I desperately wanted to say 'Mush' but wisely thought better of it away from the friendly confines of the 'social club', "I don't know anybody besides our mutual friend 'Charlie Chan'. And a local guy named 'Buddy' who you might know. That's the only two guys I know, in that way, if I understand your meaning.

"That's why I asked you about someone in *Vegas*. 'Cause I don't know anyone there either.

"And respectfully, it might jinx me, telling anyone else my plays. You know almost all of 'em every night anyway," I purposely said 'almost' just to keep him generally honest, thinking I was also betting with other bookies. Guys like 'Mush' loved

guys like me because eventually they got all of their money back, usually and then some, a cycle which of course I was going to be the first to break. I was convinced of this so maybe he was picking up on my resolve and it was giving him some pause. 'Mush' tried to bore some eye-holes through my forehead but I continued to politely ignore his stare and finish my breakfast. "You sure you don't want anything?" I asked him again.

"When do you want to go to *Las Vegas*?" He asked, apparently done grilling me. For now.

I shrugged. "Maybe three, four days. Fly out Thursday night, come back Sunday sometime. Depends how hungover I am."

He jumped right in. "My friend Marcus would like you to stay at the MGM. He'll send a plane for you. Over at *Centennial*. Thursday at five-thirty if that works. You'll be at your room by seven, local time. Everything'll be comped."

Perfect.

I leaned across and shook his hand, his grip firm despite its boniness. "Thanks. After I clean him out I'll take you up on ten-dimes per starting next Monday."

'Mush's' reptilian smile returned briefly. "Sounds like a plan, Dan.

"I like you. Just don't be a *schmuck*. You know what *schmuck* means?"

"I'm a writer. " I slid my empty pate aside." And I didn't figure you for Jewish."

"Yeah. Right. I'll tell you anyway, the context, you know. In this business the *schmuck* is the guy who goes on a world-class run then blows it all on women and hooch and drugs, whatever."

"Or *Vegas*." I smiled, wanting to tell him that really, I had it all under control.

"Yeah, right. Especially there."

I knew he wasn't all that concerned with my wellbeing but more concerned that I would come back flat-busted and he'd never get back any of his cash that I'd won.

They left without thanking me for the coffee. I left the waitress a twenty dollar tip. Now all I had to do was figure out how to interview this 'Marcus' without winding up in a hole somewhere in the desert. If that sort of thing still went on.

It was surreal. The limo to *Centennial Airport* in Denver, the twelve-seater private jet with just me in it which lived up to all the hype, and got me there in half the time, where another limo whisked me to the *MGM Grand* a six-thousand room behemoth caddy-corner to *Caesar's Palace* .

By the time I got to my room, really 'rooms' as I was definitely in a 'high-roller' suite, I had it all worked out. How to get an anonymous yet interesting interview about how legitimate, fine gambling establishments might, indirectly, (of course) still have ties with bookmaking; street crime. I waited patiently in the living room, after a shower in an unbelievable bathroom that was half the size of my apartment, dressed in an *Armani* ensemble *sans* jacket, my sleeves rolled neatly just past my wrists.

I was a man of action.

My idea was to subtly get Marcus Wyatt, whose official title was '*Operations Manager*', which meant casino boss, to denounce illegal gambling while propping up the legitimacy and safeguards of 'gaming' at reputable *Vegas* hotels (like the MGM). Then, I could masterfully ask a few innocuous questions about what Marcus *thought* might be the state of affairs of illegal gambling and see where it went.

Marcus was surprisingly candid. He even laughed when I told him we could keep his name and hotel out of it. He said: "Your paper has a circulation of eight-hundred fifty-thousand. Town's got direct service to *Las Vegas* from two area airports. That is why I'm granting this interview." I nodded but waited for him to speak as he seemed to be waiting for me. I think I read that somewhere; *the guy, who speaks first, loses*. "Additionally, you are here at MGM as one of our premiere guests, and I'm hoping that my accessibility will incline you spend some time enjoying our facilities."

I wanted to say: *No shit, Sherlock. I arranged for this dance, remember? But the way I've been going you may not feel that way by Saturday*. Instead, I said: "I plan to. The hospitality so far has been nothing short of outstanding. But I'm just a nickel-and-dime guy, on an assignment. Your basic reporter."

Marcus Leaned back into the *Italian-leather* chair and looked out the window to the magnificent view of the *Las Vegas* strip; *Caeser's Palace*; about a dozen fountains, and more lights than an undisturbed nighttime sky. I put him in his mid-fifties; graying just right, fit in a tennis sort of way, impeccably dressed.

We talked for about ten minutes, he answered all of my questions with ease including some statistical analysis I couldn't imagine he had in his head which made me wonder how much he knew about me and my little excursion long before he ever sent the MGM jet to *Centennial Airport* to pick me up. When I would cross-reference his data back in Denver, I would find that much of it was gleaned from industry analysis designed to shape the perception of politicians in states without gambling as to why they were better off with the established, legitimate hotels in *Las Vegas* and how

disastrous it could be for their states if they chose to open their own casinos, or allowed the black-market element of bookmakers to thrive. Very smooth.

We seemed to be wrapping things up as he'd glanced at his watch twice in just a few minutes, then almost on cue an assistant walked in, without knocking I may add although I probably couldn't have heard the door if he did, as far away as it was from where we sat. He whispered something to Marcus who merely nodded but had me fixed in his serious stare now as opposed to his '*politician schmoozing*' affect he'd been sporting while we talked.

He stood to leave and shook my hand, holding onto it for just a fraction too long in a way that only a guy would understand meant something. "Are we off the record now?"

"Sure," I had already put away the pad and pen and small dictation machine.

"Our mutual friend tells me that you're the guy who's on the impressive run."

'The guy', not 'a guy'. So, Marcus had at least 'heard some things', if not already lost money to guys on the tail of my 'system'. Now, *this* was the stuff I wanted to string together on-record and like any good reporter I listened but processed feverishly as to how I might include some of it without violating our agreement...or winding up buried out in the desert. Not really, (really).

He went on. "I am assuming when you referred to yourself a moment ago as a '*nickel and dime guy*' that in casino parlance you meant you like to wager five or ten-thousand per game. Our friend also indicated that you may wish a certain level of anonymity which is something that we pride ourselves in here at the MGM. If you would prefer I could arrange a private room at our sportsbook. Or you could spend your time up here in this suite. However I may be of service please call on me, directly. Day or night." He finally let go of my hand.

"Oh, and my associate, Mr. Roberts, can offer you the services of our hotel safe if you're not entirely comfortable with the safe in your closet." *You mean if my cash won't fit.* "Or, I will gladly provide you with a suitable line of credit. Or convert any cash you might have into chips. Whatever you prefer." He looked like he was *really* getting ready to leave then stopped and seemed to take on almost a paternal air. "One more thing. A little tale if I may.

"You see, Mr. Millman, right now you're the *dragon*. The dragon kicks a bunch of ass, eats whatever it wants, gets fat. But sooner or later something'll happen. Call it a run of bad luck. Then the *dragon killer* emerges. Picks that thing up by that long tail he's

been pulling behind him and shakes him out so hard that his head pops right off. Dragon and all of those on his tail all go down at the same time.”

“Nice story.”

“Now, you know I don’t mean this in any kind of threatening manner. The fact is you know and I know that a run like yours brings in a lot of action. You’d be surprised how much it generates.

“People talk, ‘M-237’. Legally and illegally.”

“Still off the record?” I asked.

“Yes.” He looked out the window again. “Casinos are all about action. Cash-flow. As I’m sure you know. The more people we get through our front door the better we’re going to do. It’s not the losers that bring the people in, Dan, it’s the winners. We actually like winners, Mr. Millman. Love them, especially if they’re loud.

“You can print that.”

I nodded. He wished me luck and left.

I got up and went to the bar and fixed myself a little snort of single-malt scotch, in real crystal, ice from a sterling bucket, then went to the window and got right up to it so I could see the whole panoramic view. I wondered how many players (suckers) there were in suites like mine all looking out into the electric-lit ‘*promised land*’, anticipating their coming fortunes.

I will admit, in retrospect, *Las Vegas* probably did live up to all of the hype. I’d been there before, but always as one of those players who waited in line for half-an-hour to get into a cheap buffet, popping a few quarters in reachable slots while the line moved at a glacial pace. Blackjack was played at five dollars a hand; no one paid me any mind.

Did I mention I only stayed one night? A very long one, followed by a complete day of sleep, then a quick checkout and scurry back home. The MGM was kind enough to whisk me back on one of their jets, only a four-seater, but considering what I left behind in their cage it was a trifling matter.

That night I’d swung by the sportsbook and placed my bets, feeling like everyone in there knew who I was and was eying me surreptitiously but that was absurd. The place was jam-packed and millions of dollars were flowing in a never-ending stream. I spread about one-hundred fifty-thou around on a dozen or so games

which was both exhilarating and terrifying, and then hit the main casino floor, armed with a small stack of hundred-dollar chips, fiddling in my hands, and some ten-thousand dollar chips in my jacket pockets.

I played blackjack and poker; I sat at a roulette table for nearly an hour. But craps was where it really got hairy. There's so much action so quickly there that you can win a lot, or lose it all in a hurry if you're not careful. Periodically, I checked the sports scores and by about nine o'clock, I think, all of the east coast games were done and I'd taken a pounding. I imagined Marcus Wyatt on the phone with other casino bosses and *who knew who else* watching as finally the dragon's tail snapped its own damn head right off just like he'd predicted, taking maybe thousands of guys out with its whipping tail. The guy on 'The Run', me, Dan Tillman, who must have called some action in to at least one other connected guy somewhere, or maybe there was a mole in the sportsbook, who knew, but a whole lot of players with almost identical action also took the plunge that same night. Of course this meant that a lot of other players probably won big that night as my system always involved bucking what I thought were trends, so for the bosses it was likely overall a bad night, further fueling their probable enjoyment over the *dragon killer* slaying the *dragon* that had been whipping them. 'Mush', back in Denver, either kicking himself because he got down on my action himself and lost, or lamenting my morphing into a *schmuck* just like he'd said where I'd be kicked back down to 'Buddy'.

I lost one-hundred thirteen and change of the one-hundred fifty-thousand, and during a break from the main casino I took the thirty-seven thousand in winnings out in chips. No one in the sportsbook blinked. As I went back to the main floor somewhat dizzy, and not from booze, I thought that if things didn't turn soon, well, maybe I could enrich my tale by regaling what it was like for one night to be a *real* high-roller, to have people standing around behind you while you played blackjack for a thousand a hand, two or three hands if you felt like it, then spreading hundred-dollar chips all over the craps table like blown, autumn leaves, playing around for nearly fourteen hours straight; getting your clock cleaned while others at the craps table cleaned-up; polite applause when you finally relinquished the dice and left with only memories of maybe that '*full-body-rush*' that came when the luck was flowing and the chip stack was getting really high. Your pockets are decidedly less heavy from the weight of ten-thousand dollar chips. I know the exact time when the last ten-thousand chip was fished from my

jacket and exchanged for measly hundreds. Believe me, no one watches a guy with ordinary, black, hundred-dollar chips, play cards.

In the end I did write one hell of a story. Even got picked up by the AP and reprinted in all of the artsy *rags* around the country including the *granddaddy* of them all the 'Village Voice'. I sold my editor on a little creative license; that my employers at 'Westword' had staked me fifty-grand to gamble with and the whole piece tied up nicely as I described what it was like to be a king in *Vegas* for one night. Of course, it was actually *my* money that was gambled away, but still 'The Run' was more than I ever could have imagined.

As I mentioned, fiction is not my strong suit. But I had the Marcus Wyatt interview and then frankly I just interviewed myself. And wrote it all down.

So, what's it like to fly to Vegas on a private jet and blow fifty-thousand dollars in one night in a casino? No one ever had to be the wiser about the other 'issues' involving the sportsbook. The hook was that 'full-body rush'. The article evoked some spirited dialogue about the power of gambling addiction, which bothered *Vegas* about as much as the surgeon general sends 'Phillip-Morris' to bed at night, scared.

A few days later I walked out of the 'Diamond Lil', the first casino I'd gone into, this time *without* the same old fifty-dollar bill. The last one in my wallet- again. Had some 'Deja-vu', to the very start of 'The Run'. This time I was out of there so fast I could have kept the car running.

And while it was indeed the only fifty in my wallet, there *were* plenty of other bills crammed in there, and lots of them featured 'Benjamin Franklin'. I made my way out to my brand new 'Ford F150 Crew Cab', leather, loaded, and headed toward *Aurora*, a cozy suburb just outside of Denver, and my new three-bedroom house, built by my brother-in-law, Ted. Paid for with most of half of the cash I'd won before *Vegas*. The half I'd purposely left behind in *Denver*.

'Cause I'm no *schmuck*.

And I didn't need the lucky fifty anymore because my gambling days are over, forever.

Probably.