

R.Monish

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Short Story

### The Poker Game

Marwin slipped as he stepped into the snow filled driveway. "Why is the damn snow there already?" he thought. He made a mental note to clear it the first thing in the morning. He observed his overpriced classy period house- though deserted, it was welcoming for some reason. His tiny hands slid into his pockets, searching for the door keys while his mind was wandering around elsewhere. "ah the door is so elegantly carved. No wonder I had to pay so much". The metal keys were wet. Must have been the tissues, he assumed. The door clicked open; he threw his coat on the hanger and walked in like a mechanized robot. He grabbed a beer carton from the fridge and headed to the basement. The basement was still old and unfurnished in an otherwise stylish house. The steps creaked as he made his way down into the dim lit room. The old broken chandelier in the center was the only source of light. The corners were still dark and creepy at times. Marwin didn't expect a monster to leap out of the corners but still didn't completely ignore the chances. The round table with a few wooden chairs was all that the room had. He pulled one of those chairs, sat down and left the beer bottles on the table. He held his head back and looked at the ceiling.

"So that's it then, we start the game huh? I ain't waiting no more", said Mike. His weird accent didn't change through the years. But no one complained; it was sure funny when he tried talking. He chucked one whole beer bottle and burped out loud. Even his burp sounded weird. "Beer, beer, beer. You know the rules, aye bud? Let's play some poker." Mike was still for a moment waiting for an applause and cheer. "Bah, who am I kidding? Models walking in with million bucks wouldn't cheer them." He shuffled the cards like a pro and started dealing. He laid down two cards to each player, one for himself. He burned one, placed one on the center. He burned another, one more on center. He repeated that another time and left the pack by the side.

The mood changed in a split second. The tension spread around the room, joining Alan's cigar smoke. It was war. The cards lying in front of them were the answers to a lot of questions. There was one winner. The stake was huge. Eric was sweating again. His left leg shook as he reached for his cards. Alan puffed in once more and reached for his cards. The most infamous introvert at work- Alan Harrington. Ironically his mind spoke a lot, screaming mostly. He slowly turned his cards open; making sure no one else sees them. King of heart, Ace of Clubs. He smiled inside his head. His face didn't move an inch. His eyes never showed any expressions and now they looked dead. He took a big puff of the Cuban cigar. He closed his eyes and opened them to find himself in his office. There she was, beautiful as ever. The office changed into a meadow, she was still there holding the file, only this time her eyes were fixed upon Alan. She was fading out slowly, as the smoky old basement came into sight.

Eric was the ideal example for "appearances are deceptive". Smart, well built, tall and with unique charming eyes, he would have made a sure impression of confidence and power. On the contrary, he was a scared little boy inside. His body didn't support him either. He sweats shivers and panics with a simple trigger of abnormal situation. He has an excuse to offer if anyone did care to ask. A messed up teenage and seclusion. He picked his cards and flipped them. 2 hearts and 8 hearts. "Yea like I was expecting anything better to happen to me." He cursed his fate and continued staring at the ceiling. He felt the buzz of the beer he had. "The beer must be super strong. I just remember having 2 gulps of it." He went on to think about what all he remembered in the last few days. He was looking at his own image in the mirror. It was his office's washroom. He was sweating more than usual. He wiped his face and sat on the loft, waiting for his heart to pace at a normal rate. He had been running, miles

maybe. He checked himself in the mirror once more. The tee-shirt felt much more comfortable than the suits he wears for work. He felt panic. The washroom door opened.

"I call 100, losers!" shouted out Marwin. He threw a 100\$ note on the table, and looked at his card one more time. Ace of diamond and ace of spade. "Can my day *be* any better?" He was always brimming with confidence, at work, at poker table, anywhere. "I am the king", he kept telling himself. He gave one scornful look around and continued staring at his cards. Ace of diamond- "diamond". He remembered that the ring was in his coat pocket. "It's a solid *veragio* diamond Sir. She must be a very lucky woman", said the pretty girl from Tiffany and co. "It is going to be special," Marwin kept telling himself. "The 2 months with Emma has been one memorable journey. It felt like music. Emma, the prettiest girl I have seen in years. She is bloody smart and sexy too. She could have easily turned out to be an arrogant corporate woman. But no, she is the sweetest. I did notice her on my first day at office. She was the 'ok there is something to look forward to at work' girl. Things changed eventually. Emma was my good friend. There was something unique about her. Our mind set and our likings matched. The first time she held one of the clerks' infant in her arms and spent all the tea time playing with the kid- there, that was the moment when it happened. I fell in love with this woman. We got close. Our talks extended beyond office hours. Number of texts increased exponentially." BEEP. BEEP. Marwin's phone showed a new message. He opened it. ' AH, do it.'

Mike felt happiness spread through his body. It was magic. He grabbed the beer bottle and kissed it. He started swaying his head sideways. He didn't even check his cards. He shouted, "I see your 100", and threw 100\$ bill on the table. "Ok ma turn huh to theenk about ma past. Hmmm. Ok what day is it? Yea its Friday. Friday, Friday, fun fun fun". He started laughing. "God that song cracks me up every single time."

Mike opened the first 3 cards on the table- Ace of hearts, queen of clubs, and jack of diamond.

"Three of a kind," Marwin told himself. "Time to raise the stakes." He forgot about the text message in this excitement. "I am not sure about what is happening. If you can account all this feelings with something else, let me know. I'm confused. I don't know how it feels when you love someone. If this is not love, then I really don't know what is", he told Emma. They were sitting comfortably in a couch in one of the coffee shops. The pleasant rain outside made the locality greener than normal. Marwin thought it was weird, good but still weird. He looked at her. "Oh my God, she is beautiful". Emma was staring outside, probably thinking about what he just said or searching for swear words to shout at him. She turned towards him. Their eyes met for few seconds and they looked away immediately. "Darn, this is awkward."

"I don't know what to say", she finally broke the silence. "I..."

"You don't have to. Let's leave." Marwin left her alone for few minutes while he was paying the bill. They left the coffee shop. "I didn't want an answer. I just told you what I felt. So calm down. I'll leave now."

"It's raining", she said.

"I know. I like it this way. I am walking back. I want to enjoy this moment."

"Then let me walk you to your place. Why should I miss the enjoyment?"

Marwin laughed. What is she trying to tell here, his mind voice asked. "Don't be stupid. Go home. I will catch you at work tomorrow."

Alan called 500\$. He was smart than anyone else in the office. Some people with less proficiency and capability manage to publicize it well. Their feeble talent gets noticed easily. On the other hand, there are people with extraordinary brilliance and talent, who don't get recognized because they don't make a fuss about it. No one gets to know the truth. Alan belonged to the latter group. Is it a good thing? He was not sure about it. He just couldn't talk. He sits there in his cubicle all day, never really gets up

from his chair. His line of sight was always directed towards her. Ms. Rogers, that's the intelligence he gathered in these few weeks. She was definitely 'Ms'. There was no ring in her hand. Her presence made him look forward to the office hours. She was sincere to her work. But at times, she looked at him, gave him a beautiful smile or even a wink. He was not sure if he was imagining it. He concluded that, it was a natural way of being too polite to colleagues. He didn't know the rules. He rarely greeted anyone at work. He developed a liking for this few moments and waited anxiously every day, for it to happen. If she was too busy that day, he gets into 'hulk' mode and then the company ends up adding a broken glass table to its expenses list. This went on for weeks until; he saw an anonymous message on his desk. 'She likes someone else. Don't even think about it'.

Eric didn't see the point of playing the game. He was frustrated looking at the three cards. He wanted to fold. But he had nothing more to lose. He placed a 500\$ bill on the table. Eric was an investment banker. In his line of work, one had to read and analyze charts and tables on stock market all day. Long working hours, hectic work profile, lot of math and high pay are everything that defines this job. Eric's situation was worse. He always had files stacked on his desk and somehow very little time to do the work. He never really understood how he ends up in last minute panic every single time. He cursed his bad luck again. He slogged day and night and he hated his job. He brushed this thought away. He was standing in his office washroom again. The door opened. A tall large security guard walked in. "Harrington Sir, hello. Are you alright? Too much work?" Eric nodded silently. The security guard continued, "I am in the same situation today Sir. Someone broke into the security office. The place is in a real mess. We are still not sure if something is missing. Who would do that to our office anyway? I bet there is nothing in there worth more than a penny. Anyway I have to leave now. I have to find someone to mop our office floor."

Marwin was not concentrating in the game anymore. He was sure that he was going to win. He was too happy to even bother. Emma changed his life so much in such a short period. She made him happy. He thought about her pretty face and the smile.

It was way past bedtime. Emma and Marwin were standing alone in the street waiting for a cab. They were exhausted after the fun they had all day. But they were still excited and wanted the day to prolong. Marwin said, "I had fun. It was a great day. Thanks."

"Are you kidding me? I should be thanking you. It was your plan. The movie, dinner, dancing. It was brilliant."

"Yea I know. I am awesome."

"Nice try. Keep dreaming dude". Finally a cab was in sight. She got into the cab and held his hand for a little while and then said "bye". Marwin closed the cab door and in a few seconds he opened it again and sat next to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"It's late. I will accompany you till your home." She took his hands in hers again.

"You will have to come back alone and it's quite far."

"Time will pass. I think about all that happened today." There was 5 minutes of silent travel.

"In that case, here is some more for you to think about", she came forward and kissed him.

Mike was drinking his fourth beer bottle. "Aye, time for the next card guys", he said and flipped open the fourth card. Ten of hearts. "Ok, this is going to be crazy game mates". Mike set his head into oscillation once more. The basement vanished and now he was sitting in his office's security room. Ironically, the room didn't have a lot of security, he told himself. The place was a mess. Chairs were lying around, shelves open, papers and tapes everywhere. Mike was still looking through the CCTV tapes casually. He was not afraid of the corporate guys. They can fire him. Yea. But it is ok, he kept telling himself. He wanted to use the washroom. "Bah, waste of time, going all the way there." A few

minutes later, he was still sitting in the chair browsing through the footages, but now the room smelt real bad. He finally found the clip. There was a couple standing at the deserted lobby of the building, kissing. He removed the tape and ran out of the room with it. He sprinted across the room, up the stairs and reached his cubicle. Mike grabbed a small sheet of paper from the desk, made a note and left the tape beside it. He heard footsteps somewhere near. He ran again, this time he headed towards the washroom.

Mike woke up finding himself lying down on the basement floor. He assumed that he must have slipped from his chair. He lay there in that position and checked the sent messages in phone. 'AH. Do it.' "Good. It was sent".

Marwin was on his knees. The terrace floor was rough; it hurt his knees. "Emma Rogers, will you marry me?" he asked. She started laughing.

"Where is my ring?" she asked.

"Does it matter? It's a momentary thing. Give an answer."

"Ok fine. Marwin Harrington, I will be happy to marry you."

Alan punched his fist on the table. He was still thinking about the decision he had made. He wins, he walks away silently. If he loses, he has to use the knife in his pocket. He was getting impatient. He took some more 100\$ bills and threw it on the table. The last few days were painful and agonizing for him. The tape shook every bit of him. The last bit of hope in his life was lost. He felt betrayed and cheated. He punched once more into the table.

Alan got up from his chair, pulled another chair and sat down. The change in voice and accent was instantaneous. "Aye, I am folding guys. Finally the time for the last piece to solve the puzzle." He flipped open the last and the fifth card.

'Seven of hearts'.

He moved once more to the next chair and shouted. "I won. It's a flash. Can you believe it? I won." Eric was shivering again from excitement.

Even before the excitement surrounding him lowered, he reached for the knife in his pocket and plunged it into his chest.

"I lost. It was fate's decision. Don't blame me", said Alan holding his left chest.

Marwin was lying down on the floor. He was bleeding. The pain was excruciating. His vision got blurry. Tears were rolling down his cheek. He closed his eyes. There she was. Emma. Ms. Rogers – *the* woman. She smiled at him. Everything turned blank.