

Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes

Harlan Ellison

Comes now the double-cross. If you're reading these consecutively, Ellison follows Ballard like a double-shot of Jack Daniel's after a whisky sour. He is about to punch you in the belly. His prose is as stark as a skull by Georgia O'Keefe and as steady as a jackhammer. His themes are always different and always interesting. He never wastes a word, though he's got a lot of them in him. Also, though it's not why he's here, nor intended to be intrusive, he's one of the few people in the world I consider a friend. So I'll tell you a thing about him: unlike Norman Mailer, he need not refer to anything specifically as an advertisement for himself. Everything he writes fills this bill. He writes the most beautiful introductions I have ever read for his own stories. Consider the fact that everything a man writes is really only a part of one big story, to be ended by the end of his writing life. Consider that, as so many have said, everything a man writes is, basically, autobiographical. Pick up any book by this man, and you will be entranced by learning

precisely what went into the creative process. He tells you beforehand, then follows with the story. This one began in Las Vegas and ended with sickness and beauty. I tell you these things because every writer who has ever lived is unique.

Harlan, though, is so damned unique that most editors don't know what to make of him. If you ever meet him, you'll know what I mean. There is no separation whatsoever between the subject and the object, the man and his work. When he writes, that's what he is. I'd say intense, but that's trite and if you know him, redundant, too.

PRETTY MAGGIE MONEYEYES

Harlan Ellison

With an eight hole-card and a queen showing, with the dealer showing a four up, Kostner decided to let the house do the work. So he stood, and the dealer turned up six.

The dealer looked like something out of a 1935 George Raft film: Arctic diamond-chip eyes, manicured fingers long as a brain surgeon's, straight black hair slicked flat away from the pale forehead. He did not look up as he peeled them off.

A three. Another three. Barn. A five. Barn. Twenty-one, and Kostner saw his last thirty dollars six five-dollar chips scraped on the edge of the cards, into the dealer's chip racks. Busted. Flat. Down and out in Las Vegas, Nevada. Play-

ground of the Western World.

He slid off the comfortable stool-chair and turned his back on the blackjack table. The action was already starting again, like waves closing over a drowned man. He had been there, was gone, and no one had noticed. No one had seen a man blow the last tie with salvation. Kostner now had his choice: he could bum his way into Los Angeles and try to find something that resembled a new life . . . or he could go blow his brains out through the back of his head.

Neither choice showed much light or sense.

He thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his worn and dirty chinos, and started away down the line of slot machines clanging and rattling on the other side of the aisle between blackjack tables.

He stopped. He felt something in his pocket. Beside him, but all-engrossed, a fiftyish matron in electric lavender capris, high heels and Ship 'n' Shore blouse was working two slots, loading and pulling one while waiting for the other to clock down. She was dumping quarters in a seemingly inexhaustible supply from a Dixie cup held in her left hand. There was a surrealistic presence to the woman. She was almost automated, not a flicker of expression on her face, the eyes fixed and unwavering. Only when the gong rang, someone down the line had pulled a jackpot, did she look up. And at that moment Kostner knew what was wrong and immoral and deadly about

Vegas, about legalized gambling, about setting the traps all baited and open in front of the average human. The woman's face was gray with hatred, envy, lust and dedication to the game in that timeless instant when she heard another drugged soul down the line winning a minuscule jackpot. A jackpot that would only lull the player with words like luck and ahead of the game. The jackpot lure; the sparkling, hobbling many-colored wiggler in a sea of poor fish.

The thing in Kostner's pocket was a silver dollar.

He brought it out and looked at it.

The eagle was hysterical.

But Kostner pulled to an abrupt halt, only one half-foot step from the sign indicating the limits of Tap City. He was still within it. What the high-rollers called the edge, the vigorish, the fine hole-card. One buck. One cartwheel. Pulled out of the pocket not half as deep as the pit into which Kostner had just been about to plunge.

What -the hell, he thought, and turned to the row of slot machines.

He had thought they'd all been pulled out of service, the silver dollar slots. A shortage of coinage, said the United States Mint. But right there, side by side with the nickel and quarter bandits, was one cartwheel machine. Two thousand dollar jackpot. Kostner grinned foolishly. If you're gonna go out, go out like a champ.

He thumbed the silver dollar into the coin slot and grabbed

the heavy, oiled handle. Shining cast aluminum and pressed steel. Big black plastic ball, angled for arm-ease, pull it all day and you won't get weary.

Without a prayer in the universe, Kostner pulled the handle.

She had been born in Tucson, mother full-blooded Cherokee, father a bindlestiff on his way through. Mother had been working a truckers' stop, father had popped for spencer steak and sides. Mother had just gotten over a bad scene, indeterminate origins, unsatisfactory culminations. Mother had popped for bed. And sides. Margaret Annie Jessie had come nine months later; black of hair, fair of face, and born into a life of poverty. Twenty-three years later, a determined product of Miss Clairol and Berlitz, a dream-image formed by Vogue and intimate association with the rat race, Margaret Annie Jessie had become a contraction.

Maggie.

Long legs, trim and coltish; hips a trifle large, the kind that promote that specific thought in men, about getting their hands around it; belly flat, isometrics; waist cut to the bone, a waist that works in any style from dirndl to disco-slacks; no breasts all nipple, but no breast, like an expensive whore (the way O'Hara pinned it) and no padding . . . forget the cans, baby, there's other, more important action; smooth, Michelangelo-sculpted neck, a pillar, proud; and all that face.

Outthrust chin, perhaps a tot too much belligerence, but if you'dwalloped as many gropers, you too, sweetheart; nar - ro< mouth, petulant lower lip, nice to chew on, a lower lip as thoughfilled with honey, bursting, ready for things to hap - pen; a nose that threw the right sort of shadow, flaring nostrils, the acceptable wordsaquiline, patrician, classic, (dlathat; cheekbones: as stark and promontory as a spit of landafter ten years of open ocean; cheekbones holding dark - nesslike narrow shadows, sooty beneath the taut-fleshed bone - structure; amazing cheekbones, the whole face, really; simple uptittedeyes, the touch of the Cherokee, eyes that looked out atyou, as you looked in at them, like someone peering out of thekeyhole as you peered in; actually, dirty eyes, they said youcan get it.

Blonde hair, a great deal of it, wound and rolled and smoothedand flowing, in the old style, the pageboy thing men alwaysadmire; no tight little cap of slicked plastic; no ratted andteased Anapurna of bizarre coiffure; no ironed-flat dis - cothiquehair like number 3 flat noodles. Hair, the way a manwants it, so he can dig his hands in at the base of the neckand pull all that face very close.

An operable woman, a working mechanism, a rigged and suddenmachinery of softness and motivation.

Twenty-three, and determined as hell never to abide in that valeof poverty her mother had called purgatory for her en - tirelife; snuffed out in a grease fire in the last trailer, some -

wherein Arizona, thank God no more pleas for a little money
from babygirl Maggie hustling drinks in a Los Angeles topless
joint. (There ought to be some remorse in there somewhere,
for a Mommy gone where all the good grease-fire victims go.
Look around, you'll find it.)

Maggie.

Genetic freak. Mammy's Cherokee uptilted eye-shape, and
Polack quickscrewing Daddy Without a Name's blue w inno -
cense color.

Blue-eyed Maggie, dyed blonde, alla that face, alla that leg,
fiftybucks a night can get it and it sounds like it's having a
climax.

Irish-innocent blue-eyed innocent French-legged innocent
Maggie. Polack. Cherokee. Irish. All-woman and going on the
market for this month's rent on the stucco pad, eighty bucks'
worth of groceries, a couple months' worth for a Mustang,
three appointments with the specialist in Beverly Hills about
that shortness of breath after a night on the Bugalu .

Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, pretty Maggie Moneyeyes , who
came from Tucson and trailers and rheumatic fever and a
surge to live that was all kaleidoscope frenzy of clawing
scrabbling no-nonsense. If it took laying on one's back and
making sounds like a panther in the desert, then one did it,
because nothing, but nothing, was as bad as being dirt-poor,
itchy-skinned, soiled-underwear, scuff-toed, hairy and ashamed

lousy with the no-gots. Nothing!

Maggie.Hooker.Hustler.Grabber.Swinger. If there's a buck in it, there's rhythm and the onomatopoeia is Maggie Maggie Maggie .

She who puts out.For a price, whatever that might be.

Maggie was dating Nuncio. He was Sicilian. He had dark eyes and an alligator-grain wallet with slip-in pockets for creditcards. He was a spender, a sport, a high-roller. They went to Vegas.

Maggie and the Sicilian.Her blue eyes and his slip-in pockets.But mostly her blue eyes.

The spinning reels behind the three long glass windows blurred, and Kostner knew there wasn't a chance. Two thousand dollar jackpot.Round and round, whirring. Three bells or two bells and a jackpot bar, get 18; three plums or two plums and a jackpot bar, get 14; three oranges or two oranges and a jac

Ten, five, two bucks for a single cherry cluster in first position. Something . . . I'm drowning . . . something . . .

The whirring . . .

Round and round . . .

As something happened that was not considered in the pit-boss manual.

The reels whipped and snapped to a stop, clank clank clank, tight in place.

Three bars looked up at Kostner . But they did not say

JACKPOT. They were three bars on which stared three blue eyes. Very blue, very immediate, very JACKPOT!!

Twenty silver dollars clattered into the payoff trough at the bottom of the machine. An orange light flickered on in the Casino Cashier's cage, bright orange on the jackpot board. And the gong began clanging overhead.

The Slot Machine Floor Manager nodded once to the Pit Boss, who pursed his lips and started toward the seedy-looking man still standing with his hand on the slot's handle.

The token payment twenty silver dollars lay untouched in the payoff trough. The balance of the jackpot one thousand nine hundred and eighty dollars would be paid manually by the Casino Cashier. And Kostner stood, dumbly, as the three blue eyes stared up at him.

There was a moment of idiotic disorientation, as Kostner stared back at the three blue eyes; a moment in which the slot machine's mechanisms registered to themselves; and the gong was clanging furiously.

All through the hotel's Casino people turned from their game to stare. At the roulette tables the white-on-white players from Detroit and Cleveland pulled their watery eyes away from the clattering ball and stared down the line for a second, at the ratty-looking guy in front of the slot machine. From where they sat, they could not tell it was a two grand pot, and their rheumy eyes went back into billows of cigar

smoke, and that little ball.

The blackjack hustlers turned momentarily, screwing around in their seats, and smiled. They were closer to the slot-players' intemperament, but they knew the slots were a dodge to keep the old ladies busy, while the players worked toward their endless twenty-ones.

And the old dealer, who could no longer cut it at the fast-action boards, who had been put out to pasture by a grateful management, standing at the Wheel of Fortune near the entrance to the Casino, even he paused in his zombie-murmuring ("Annnnother winner onna Wheel of Forchun !") to no one at all, and looked toward Kostner and that incredible gong-clanging. Then, in a moment, still with no players, he called another nonexistent winner.

Kostner heard the gong from far away. It had to mean he had won two thousand dollars, but that was impossible. He checked the payoff chart on the face of the machine. Three bars labeled JACKPOT meant JACKPOT. Two thousand dollars.

But these three bars did not say JACKPOT. They were three gray bars, rectangular in shape, with three blue eyes directly in the center of each bar.

Blue eyes?

Somewhere, a connection was made, and electricity, a billion volts of electricity, were shot through Kostner. His hair stood on end, his fingertips bled raw, his eyes turned to jelly,

and every fiber in his musculature became radioactive. Somewhere, out there, in a place that was not this place, Kostner had been inextricably bound to someone. Blue eyes?

The gong had faded out of his head, the constant noise level of the Casino, chips chattering, people mumbling, dealers calling plays, it had all gone, and he was embedded in silence.

Tied to that someone else, out there somewhere, through those blue eyes.

Then in an instant, it had passed, and he was alone again, as though released by a giant hand, the breath crushed out of him. He staggered up against the slot machine.

"You all right, fellah?"

A hand gripped him by the arm, steadied him. The gong was still clanging overhead somewhere, and he was breathless from a journey he had just taken. His eyes focused and he found himself looking at the stocky Pit Boss who had been on duty while he had been playing blackjack.

"Sounds like you got yourself a big jackpot, fellah," the Pit Boss grinned. It was a leathery grin; something composed of stretched muscles and conditioned reflexes, totally mirthless.

"Yeah . . . great . . ." Kostner tried to grin back. But he was still shaking from that electrical absorption that had kidnaped him.

"Let me check it out," the Pit Boss was saying, edging

around Kostner, and staring at the face of the slot machine.

"Yeah, three jackpot bars, all right. You're a winner."

Then it dawned on Kostner ! Two thousand dollars! He looked down at the slot machine and saw

Three bars with the word JACKPOT on them. No blue eyes, just words that meant money. Kostner looked around frantically, was he losing his mind? From somewhere, not in the Casino room, he heard a tinkle of rhodium-plated laughter.

He scooped up the twenty silver dollars, and the Pit Boss dropped another cartwheel into the Chief, and pulled the jackpot off. Then the Pit Boss walked him to the rear of the Casino, talking to him in a muted, extremely polite tone of voice. At the Cashier's window, the Pit Boss nodded to a weary-looking man at a huge Rolodex card-file, checking credit ratings.

"Bamey, jackpot on the cartwheel Chief; slot five-oh-oh-one-five." He grinned at Kostner, who tried to smile back. It was difficult. He felt stunned.

The Cashier checked a payoff book for the correct amount to be drawn and leaned over the counter toward Kostner.

"Check or cash, sir?"

Kostner felt buoyancy coming back to him. "Is the Casino's check good?" They all three laughed at that. "A check's fine," Kostner said. "The check was drawn, and the Check-Riter punched out the little bumps that said two thousand. "The

twentycartwheels are a gift," the Cashier said, sliding the checkthrough to Kostner .

He held it, looked at it, and still found it difficult to believe. Two grand, back on the golden road.

As he walked back through the Casino with the Pit Boss, the stocky man asked pleasantly, "Well, what are you going to do with it?" Kostner had to think a moment. He didn't really have any plans. But then the sudden realization came to him: "I'm going to play that slot machine again." The Pit Boss smiled: a congenital sucker. He would put all twenty of those silver dollars back into the Chief, and then turn to the other games. Blackjack, roulette, faro, baccarat . . . in a few hours he would have redeposited the two grand with the hotel Casino. It always happened.

He walked Kostner back to the slot machine, and patted him on the shoulder. "Lotsaluck, fellah."

As he turned away, Kostner slipped a silver dollar into the machine, and pulled the handle.

The Pit Boss had only taken five steps when he heard the incredible sound of the reels clicking to a stop, the clash of twenty token silver dollars hitting the payoff trough, and that goddammed gong went out of its mind again.

She had known that sonofabitch Nuncio was a perverted swine. A walking filth. A dungheap between his ears. Some kind of monster in nylon undershorts . There weren't many

kinds of games Maggie hadn't played, but what that Sicilian

De Sade wanted to do was outright vomity !

She nearly fainted when he suggested it. Her heart which the Beverly Hills specialist had said she should not tax began whumping frantically. "You pig!" she screamed. "You filthy dirty ugly pig you. Nuncio you pig!" She had bounded out of the bed and started to throw on clothes. She didn't even bother with a brassiere, pulling the poor-boy sweater over her thin breasts, still crimson with the touches and love bites Nuncio had showered on them.

He sat up in the bed, a pathetic-looking little man, gray hair at the temples and no hair at all on top, and his eyes were moist. He was porcine, was indeed the swine she called him, but he was helpless before her. He was in love with his hooker, with the tart whom he was supporting, it had been the first time for the swine Nuncio, and he was helpless. Back in Detroit, had it been a floozy, a chippy broad, he would have gotten out of the double bed and rapped her around pretty good. But this Maggie, she tied him in knots. He had suggested. . . that, what they should do together . . . because he was so consumed with her. But she was furious with him. It wasn't that bizarre an ideal

" Gimme a chance t'talk t'ya , honey . . . Maggie . . ."

"You filthy pig. Nuncio! Give me some money, I'm going down to the Casino, and I don't want to see your filthy pig face for the rest of the day, remember that!"

And she had gone in his wallet and pants, and taken eight hundred and sixteen dollars, while he watched. He was helpless before her. She was something stolen from a world he knew only as "class" and she could do what she wanted with him.

Genetic freak Maggie, blue-eyed posing mannequin Maggie, pretty Maggie Moneyeyes, who was one-half Cherokee and one-half a buncha other things, had absorbed her lessons well. She was the very model of a "class broad."

"Not for the rest of the day, do you understand?" she snapped at him, and went downstairs, furious, to fret and gamble and wonder about nothing but years of herself.

Men stared after her as she walked. She carried herself like a challenge, the way a squire carried a pennant, the way a prizebitch carried herself in the judge's ring. Born to the blue. The wonders of mimicry and desire.

Maggie had no desire for gambling, none whatever. She merely wanted to taste the fury of her relationship with the swine Sicilian, her need for solidarity in a life built on the edge of the slide area, the senselessness of being here in Las Vegas when she could be back in Beverly Hills. She grew angrier and more ill at the thought of Nuncio upstairs in the room, taking another shower. She bathed three times a day. But it was different with him. He knew she resented his smell; he had the soft odor of wet fur sometimes, and she had told

him about it. Now he bathed constantly, and hated it. He was a foreigner to the bath. His life had been marked by various kinds of filths, and baths for him now were more of an obscenity than dirt could ever have been. For her, bathing was different. It was a necessity. She had to keep the patina of the world off her, had to remain clean and smooth and white. A presentation, not an object of flesh and hair. A chromium instrument, something never pitted by rust and corrosion. When she was touched by them, by any one of them, by the men, by all the Nuncios, they left little pit holes of bloody rust on her white, permanent flesh; cobwebs, sooty stains. She had to bathe. Often.

She strolled down between the tables and the slots, carrying eight hundred and sixteen dollars. Eight one hundred dollar bills and sixteen dollars in ones.

At the change booth she got cartwheels for the sixteen ones. The Chief waited. It was her baby. She played it to infuriate the Sicilian. He had told her to play the nickel slots, the quarter or dime slots, but she always infuriated him by blowing fifty or a hundred dollars in ten minutes, one coin after another, in the big Chief.

She faced the machine squarely, and put in the first silver dollar. She pulled the handle that swine Nuncio. Another dollar, pulled the handle how long does this go on? The reels cycled and spun and whirled and whipped in a blurring spin - ning metal humming over and over and over as Maggie blue-eyed

Maggie hated and hated and thought of hate and all the days and nights of swine behind her and ahead of her and if only she had all the money in this room in this Casino in this hotel in this town right now this very instant just an instant this instant it would be enough to whirring and humming and spinning and over and over and over and over and she would be free free free and all the world would never touch her body again the swine would never touch her white flesh again and then suddenly as dollar after dollar after dollar went around around hummmmming in reels of cherries and bells and bars and plums and oranges there was suddenly pain pain pain a SHARP pain! pain! pain! in her chest, her heart, her center, a needle, a lancet, a burning, a pillar of flame that was purest purest PAIN!

Maggie, pretty Maggie Moneyeyes, who wanted all that money in that cartwheel Chief slot machine, Maggie who had come from filth and rheumatic fever, who had come all the way to three baths a day and a specialist in Very Expensive Beverly Hills, that Maggie suddenly had a seizure, a flutter, a slam of a coronary thrombosis and fell instantly dead on the floor of the Casino. Dead.

One instant she had been holding the handle of the slot machine, willing her entire being, all that hatred for all the swine she had ever rolled with, willing every fiber of every cell of every chromosome into that machine, wanting to suck out

every silver vapor within its belly, and the next instant so
close they might have been the same her heart exploded and
killed her and she slipped to the floor . . . still touching tile
Chief.

On the floor.

Dead.

Struck dead.

Liar. All the lies that were her life.

Dead on a floor.

[A moment out of time lights whirling and spinning in a
cotton candy universe down a bottomless funnel roundly
sectioned like a goat's horn a cornucopia that rose up cuculi -
forms smooth and slick as a worm belly endless nights that
pealed ebon funeral bells out of fog out of weight-
lessness suddenly total cellular knowledge memory running
backward gibbering spastic blindness a soundless owl of
frenzy trapped in a cave of prisms sand endlessly draining
down billows of forever edges of the world as they
splintered foam rising drowning from inside the smell of
rust rough green corners that bum memory the gibbering
spastic blind memory seven rushing vacuums of nothing
yellow pinpoint cast in amber straining and elongating
running like live wax chill fevers overhead the odor of
stop this is the stopover before hell or heaven this is
limbo trapped and doomed alone in a mist-eaten nowhere
a soundless screaming a soundless whirring a soundless spin-

ningspinning spinning spinning spinning * spinning

spinning spinninggggggggggg]

Maggie had wanted all the silver in the machine. She
haddied, willing herself into the machine. Now,
lookingout from within, from inside the limbo that
hadbecome her own purgatory, Maggie was trapped,
thesoul of Maggie was trapped, in the oiled and
anodizedinterior of the silver dollar slot machine.

The prison of her final desires, where she had wanted
tobe, completely trapped in that last instant of life
betweenlife/death. Maggie, all soul now, trapped for
alleternity in the soul of the machine. Trapped.

"I hope you don't mind if I call over one of the slot men,"
theSlot Machine Floor Manager was saying, from a far
distance. He was in his late fifties, a velvet-voiced man whose
eyesheld nothing of light and certainly nothing of kindness.

He had stopped the Pit Boss as the stocky man had turned in
mid-stepto return to Kostner and the jackpotted machine; he
hadtaken the walk himself. "We have to make sure, you
knowhow it is, somebody didn't fool with the slot, you know,
maybeit's outta whack or something, you know."

He lifted his left hand and there was a clicker in it, the
kindchildren use at Halloween. He clicked half a dozen
times, like a rabid cricket, and there was a scurrying in the
pitbetween the tables.

Kostner was only faintly aware of what was happening.

Instead of being totally awake, feeling the surge of adrenaline through his veins, the feeling any gambler gets when he is ahead of the game, a kind of desperate urgency when he has hit it for a boodle, he was numb, partaking of the action around him only as much as a drinking glass involves itself in the alcoholic's drunken binge.

All color and sound had been leached out of him.

A tired-looking, resigned-weary man wearing a gray porter's jacket, as gray as his hair, as gray as his indoor skin, came to them, carrying a leather wrap-up of tools. The slot repairman studied the machine, turning the pressed steel body around on its stand, studying the back. He used a key on the backdoor and for an instant Kostner had a view of gears, springs, armatures and the clock that ran the slot mechanism. The repairman nodded silently over it, closed and relocked it, turned it around again and studied the face of the machine.

"Nobody's been spooning it," he said, and went away.

Kostner stared at the Floor Manager.

"Gaffing. That's what he meant. Spooning's another word for it. Some guys use a little piece of plastic, or a wire, shove it down through the escalator, it kicks the machine. Nobody thought that's what happened here, but you know, we have to make sure, two grand is a big payoff, and twice . . . well, you know, I'm sure you'll understand. If a guy was doing it with a boomerang"

Kostner raised an eyebrow.

"uh, yeah, a boomerang, it's another way to spoon the machine. But we just wanted to make a little check, and now everybody's satisfied, so if you'll just come back to the Casino Cashier with me"

And they paid him off again.

So he went back to the slot machine, and stood before it for a long time, staring at it. The change girls and the dealers going off-duty, the little old ladies with their canvas work gloves worn to avoid calluses when pulling the slot handles, the men's room attendant on his way up front to get more matchbooks, the floral tourists, the idle observers, the hard drinkers, the sweepers, the busboys, the gamblers with poached-egg eyes who had been up all night, the showgirls with massive breasts and diminutive sugar daddies, all of them conjectured mentally about the beat-up walker who was staring at the silver dollar Chief. He did not move, merely stared at the machine . . . and they wondered.

The machine was staring back at Kostner .

Three blue eyes.

The electric current had sparked through him again, as the machine had clocked down and the eyes turned up a second time, as he had won a second time. But this time he knew there was something more than luck involved, for no one else had seen those three blue eyes.

So now he stood before the machine, waiting. It spoke to him. Inside his skull, where no one had ever lived but himself, now someone else moved and spoke to him. A girl. A beautiful girl. Her name was Maggie, and she spoke to him: I've been waiting for you. A long time, I've been waiting for you, Kostner. Why do you think you hit the jackpot? Because I've been waiting for you, and I want you. You'll win all the jackpots. Because I want you, I need you. Love me, I'm Maggie, I'm so alone, love me.

Kostner had been staring at the slot machine for a very long time, and his weary brown eyes had seemed to be locked to the blue eyes on the jackpot bars. But he knew no one else could see the blue eyes, and no one else could hear the voice, and no one else knew about Maggie.

He was the universe to her. Everything to her.

He thumbed in another silver dollar, and the Pit Boss watched, the slot machine repairman watched, the Slot Machine Floor Manager watched, three change girls watched, and a pack of unidentified players watched, some from their seats.

The reels whirled, the handle snapped back, and in a second they flipped down to a halt, twenty silver dollars tokened themselves into the payoff trough and a woman at one of the craptables belched a fragment of hysterical laughter.

And the gong went insane again.

The Floor Manager came over and said, very softly, "Mr.

Kostner, it'll take us about fifteen minutes to pull this machine and check it out. I'm sure you understand." As two slot repairmen came out of the back, hauled the Chief off its stand, and took it into the repair room at the rear of the Casino.

While they waited, the Floor Manager regaled Kostner with stories of spooners who had used intricate magnets inside their clothes, of boomerang men who had attached their plastic implements under their sleeves so they could be extended on spring-loaded clips, of cheaters who had come equipped with tiny electric drills in their hands and wires that slipped into the tiny drilled holes. And he kept saying he knew Kostner would understand.

But Kostner knew the Floor Manager would not understand.

When they brought the Chief back, the repairmen nodded assuredly. "Nothing wrong with it. Works perfectly. Nobody's been boomin' it."

But the blue eyes were gone on the jackpot bars.

Kostner knew they would return.

They paid him off again.

He returned and played again. And again. And again.

They put a "spotter" on him. He won again. And again. And again. The crowd had grown to massive proportions. Word had spread like the silent communications of the telegraph

vine, up and down the Strip, all the way to downtown Vegas and the sidewalk casinos where they played night and day every day of the year, and the crowd moved toward the hotel, and the Casino, and the seedy-looking walker with his weary brown eyes. The crowd moved to him inexorably, drawn like lemmings by the odor of the luck that rose from him like musky electrical cracklings. And he won. Again and again. Thirty-eight thousand dollars. And the three blue eyes continued to stare up at him. Her lover was winning. Maggie and her Moneyeyes.

Finally, the Casino decided to speak to Kostner. They pulled the Chief for fifteen minutes, for a supplemental check by experts from the slot machine company in downtown Vegas, and while they were checking it, they asked Kostner to come to the main office of the hotel.

The owner was there. His face seemed faintly familiar to Kostner. Had he seen it on television? The newspapers?

"Mr. Kostner, my name is Jules Hartshorn."

"I'm pleased to meet you."

"Quite a string of luck you're having out there."

"It's been a long time coming."

"You realize this sort of luck is impossible."

"I'm compelled to believe it, Mr. Hartshorn."

"Um. As am I. It's happening to my Casino. But we're thoroughly convinced of one of two possibilities, Mr. Kostner: one, either the machine is inoperable in a way we can't

detect, or two, you are the most clever spooner we've ever hadin here."

"I'm not cheating."

"As you can see, Mr. Kostner , I'm smiling. The reason I'm smilingis at your naivet ~ in believing I would take your word forit. I'm perfectly happy to nod politely and say of course youaren't cheating. But no one can win thirty-eight thousand dollaron nineteen straight jackpots off one slot machine; it doesn'teven have mathematical odds against its happening, Mr. Kostner . It's on a cosmic scale of improbability with threedark planets crashing into our sun within the next twenty minutes. It's on a par with the Pentagon, Peking and the Kremlin all three pushing the red button at the same micro-second. It'san impossibility , Mr. Kostner .An impossibility that'shappening to me."

"I'm sorry."

"Not really."

"No, not really.I can use the money."

"For what, exactly, Mr. Kostner ?"

"I hadn't thought about it, really."

"I see. Well, Mr. Kostner , let's look at it this way. I can't stopyou from playing, and if you continue to win, I'll be requiredto pay off. And no stubble-chinned thugs will be waitingin an alley to jackroll you and take the money. The checkswill all be honored . The best I can hope for, Mr.

Kostner, is the attendant publicity. Right now, every player in Vegas is in that Casino, waiting for you to drop cart-wheels into that machine. It won't make up for what I'm losing, if you continue the way you've been, but it will help. Every high-roller in town likes to rub up next to luck. All I ask is that you cooperate a little."

"The least I can do, considering your generosity."

"An attempt at humor ."

"I'm sorry. What is it you'd like me to do?"

"Get about ten hours' sleep."

"While you pull the slot and have it worked over thoroughly?"

"Yes."

"If I wanted to keep winning, that might be a pretty stupid move on my part. You might change the hickamajig inside so I couldn't win if I put back every dollar of that thirty-eight grand."

"We're licensed by the state of Nevada, Mr. Kostner ."

"I come from a good family, too, and take a look at me. I'm a bum with thirty-eight thousand dollars in my pocket."

"Nothing will be done to that slot machine, Kostner ."

"Then why pull it for ten hours?"

"To work it over thoroughly in the shop. If something as undetectable as metal fatigue or a worn escalator tooth or we want to make sure this doesn't happen with other machines. And the extra time will get the word around town;

we can use the crowd. Some of those tourists will stick to our fingers, and it'll help defray the expense of having you break the bank at this Casino on a slot machine."

"I have to take your word."

"This hotel will be in business long after you're gone,

Kostner."

"Not if I keep winning."

Hartshorn's smile was a stricture. "A good point."

"So it isn't much of an argument."

"It's the only one I have. If you want to get back out on

that floor, I can't stop you."

"No Mafia hoods ventilate me later?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: no Maf"

"You have a picturesque manner of speaking. In point of fact, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"I'm sure you haven't."

"You've got to stop reading The National Enquirer. This is a legally run business. I'm merely asking a favor ."

"Okay, Mr. Hartshorn , I've been three days without any sleep. Ten hours will do me a world of good."

"I'll have the desk clerk find you a quiet room on the top floor. And thank you, Mr. Kostner ."

"Think nothing of it."

"I'm afraid that will be impossible."

"A lot of impossible things are happening lately."

He turned to go, as Hartshorn lit a cigarette.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Kostner?"

Kostner stopped and half-turned. "Yes?"

His eyes were getting difficult to focus. There was a ringing in his ears. Hartshorn seemed to waver at the edge of his vision like heat lightning across a prairie. Like memories of things Kostner had come across the country to forget. Like the whimpering and pleading that kept tugging at the cells of his brain. The voice of Maggie. Still back in there, saying. . . things . . .

They'll try to keep you from me.

All he could think about was the ten hours of sleep he had been promised. Suddenly it was more important than the money, than forgetting, than anything, Hartshorn was talking, was saying things, but Kostner could not hear him. It was as if he had turned off the sound and saw only the silent rubbery movement of Hartshorn's lips. He shook his head trying to clear it.

There were half a dozen Hartshorns all melting into and out of one another. And the voice of Maggie.

I'm warm here, and alone. I could be good to you, if you can come to me. Please come, please hurry.

"Mr. Kostner?"

Hartshorn's voice came draining down through silt as thick as velvet flocking. Kostner tried to focus again. His extremely

weary brown eyes began to track.

"Did you know about that slot machine?" Hartshorn was saying. "A peculiar thing happened with it about six weeks ago."

"What was that?"

"A girl died playing it. She had a heart attack, a seizure while she was pulling the handle, and died right out there on the floor."

Kostner was silent for a moment. He wanted desperately to ask Hartshorn what color the dead girl's eyes had been, but he was afraid the owner would say blue.

He paused with his hand on the office door. "Seems as though you've had nothing but a streak of bad luck on that machine."

Hartshorn smiled an enigmatic smile. "It might not change for a while, either."

Kostner felt his jaw muscles tighten. "Meaning I might die, too, and wouldn't that be bad luck."

Hartshorn's smile became hieroglyphic, permanent, stamped on him forever. "Sleep tight, Mr. Kostner."

In a dream, she came to him. Long smooth thighs and soft gold down on her arms; blue eyes deep as the past, misted with a fine scintillance like lavender spiderwebs; taut body that was the only body Woman had ever had, from the very first.

Maggie came to him.

Hello, I've been traveling a long time.

"Who are you?" Kostner asked, wonderingly. He was standing on a chilly plain, or was it a plateau? The wind curled around them both, or was it only around him? She was exquisite, and he saw her clearly, or was it through a mist? Her voice was deep and resonant, or was it light and warm as night-blooming jasmine?

I'm Maggie. I love you. I've waited for you.

"You have blue eyes."

Yes. With love.

"You're very beautiful."

Thank you. With female amusement.

"But why me? Why let it happen to me? Are you the girl who are you the one that was sick the one who?"

I'm Maggie. And you, I picked you, because you need me.

You've needed someone for a long time.

Then it unrolled for Kostner. The past unrolled and he saw who he was. He saw himself alone. Always alone. As a child, born to kind and warm parents who hadn't the vaguest notion of who he was, what he wanted to be, where his talents lay.

So he had run off, when he was in his teens, and alone always alone on the road. For years and months and days and hours, with no one. Casual friendships, based on food, or sex, or artificial similarities. But no one to whom he could cleave, and cling, and belong. It was that way till Susie, and with her he had found light. He had discovered the scents and aromas

of a spring that was eternally one day away. He had laughed, really laughed, and known with her it would at last be all right. So he had poured all of himself into her, giving her everything; all his hopes, his secret thoughts, his tender dreams; and she had taken them, taken him, all of him, and he had known for the first time what it was to have a place to live, to have a home in someone's heart. It was all the silly and gentle things he laughed at in other people, but for him it was breathing deeply of wonder.

He had stayed with her for a long time, and had supported her, supported her son from the first marriage; the marriage Susie never talked about. And then one day, he had come back, as Susie had always known he would. He was a dark creature of ruthless habits and vicious nature, but she had been his woman, all along, and Kostner realized he had been used as a stop-gap, as a bill-payer till her wandering terror came home to nest. Then she had asked him to leave. Broke, and tapped out in all the silent inner ways a man can be drained, he had left, without even a fight, for all the fight had been leached out of him. He had left, and wandered West, and finally come to Las Vegas, where he had hit bottom. And found Maggie. In a dream, with blue eyes, he had found Maggie.

I want you to belong to me. I love you. Her truth was vibrant in Kostner's mind. She was his, at last someone who

was special, was his.

"Can I trust you? I've never been able to trust anyone before. Women, never. But I need someone. I really need someone."

It's me, always. Forever. You can trust me.

And she came to him, fully. Her body was a declaration of truth and trust such as no other Kostner had ever known before. She met him on a windswept plain of thought, and he made love to her more completely than he had known any passion before. She joined with him, entered him, mingled with his blood and his thought and his frustration, and he came away clean, filled with glory.

"Yes, I can trust you, I want you. I'm yours," he whispered to her, when they lay side by side in a dream nowhere of mind and soundlessness. "I'm yours."

She smiled, a woman's smile of belief in her man; a smile of trust and deliverance. And Kostner woke up.

The Chief was back on its stand, and the crowd had been penned back by velvet ropes. Several people had played the machine, but there had been no jackpots.

Now Kostner came into the Casino, and the "spotters" got themselves ready. While Kostner had slept, they had gone through his clothes, searching for wires, for gaffs, for spoons or boomerangs. Nothing.

Now he walked straight to the Chief, and stared at it.

Hartshorn was there. "You look tired," he said gently to

Kostner, studying the man's weary brown eyes.

"I am a little." Kostner tried a smile, which didn't work.

"I had a funny dream."

"Oh?"

"Yeah . . . about a girl . . ." he let it die off.

Hartshorn's smile was understanding . Pitying, empathic and understanding. "There are lots of girls in this town. You shouldn't have any trouble finding one with your winnings."

Kostner nodded, and slipped his first silver dollar into the

slot. He pulled the handle. The reels spun with a ferocity

Kostner had not heard before and suddenly everything went

whipping slantwise as he felt a wrenching of pure flame in his

stomach, as his head was snapped on its spindly neck, as the

lining behind his eyes was burned out. There was a terrible

shriek, of tortured metal, of an express train ripping the air

with its passage, of a hundred small animals being gutted and

torn to shreds, of incredible pain, of night winds that tore the

tops off mountains of lava. And a keening whine of a voice

that wailed and wailed and wailed as it went away from there

in blinding light

Free! Free! Heaven or Hell it doesn't matter! Free!

The sound of a soul released from an eternal prison, a genie

freed from a dark bottle. And in that instant of damp sound-

less nothingness, Kostner saw the reels snap and clock down

for the final time:

One, two, three. Blue eyes.

But he would never cash his checks.

The crowd screamed through one voice as he fell sidewise
and lay on his face. The final loneliness . . .

The Chief was pulled. Bad luck. Too many gamblers
resented its very presence in the Casino. So it was pulled. And
returned to the company, with explicit instructions it was to
be melted down to slag. And not till it was in the hands of the
ladle foreman, who was ready to dump it into the slag furnace,
did anyone remark on the final tally the Chief had clocked.

"Look at that, ain't that -weird," said the ladle foreman to
his bucket man. He pointed to the three glass windows.

"Never saw jackpot bars like that before," the bucket man
agreed. "Three eyes. Must be an old machine."

"Yeah, some of these old games go way back," the foreman
said, hoisting the slot machine onto the conveyor track lead-
ing to the slag furnace.

"Three eyes, huh. How about that. Three brown eyes." And
he threw the knife-switch that sent the Chief down the track,
topple, in the roaring inferno of the furnace.

Three brown eyes.

Three brown eyes that looked very very weary. That looked
very very trapped. That looked very very betrayed. Some of
these old games go way back.

Las Vegas and Hollywood , 1965

