

In his introduction to the anthology Wheel of Fortune Roger comments that when taking a gamble “the statisti-cal character of reality seems usually to have the upper hand.” Of course, if you’re like the narrator in Steven Brust’s story, trusting to luck just isn’t enough.

CALLING PITTSBURGH

STEVEN BRUST

THE CYGNIAN CAREFULLY PLACED TWENTY IMUS IN FRONT OF him and sat back all over his chair. The ‘Geausian, on the small blind, mucked his cards with a flash of tentacle. I had the big blind with ten imus; the Cygnian had the button, an aggressive bet, and probably nothing else.

Sorry. I’m not used to explaining this stuff to people who don’t play; stop me when you have to. I mean I had to make a forced, “blind” bet, before seeing my cards— it goes around the table, see? You take turns making a small blind bet, a big blind bet and like that, and the guy with the “button” gets to act last. Does that make sense? No? Well, never mind. In this hand the Cygnian, who had the button, would be the last to act in every round of betting, so that gave him the advantage of knowing what everyone else was doing, and I was speculating that he might have nothing except that advantage. Well, he also had a lot more chips—that is, money—on the table than I did. I peeked at my cards: Q9 offsuit. A good hand if and only if I was heads up against a pure steal, which I probably was. Tempting, but ... I mucked it. Wait for the next hand. Except for a couple of hands at the end of the round, I had position on him (that’s why I’d sat there; it always pays to have position on a Cygnian), so for that reason if no other it was best to wait.

What? Oh. No no, not your fault. By “position,” I mean that most of the time I got to decide what to do after I knew what the Cygnian was doing; that’s what “having position” on someone means.

You see, poker is all about decisions. A good player is someone who makes good decisions, that’s all. And the more you know, the better decisions you can make. So if there’s someone like your typical Cygnian who likes to steal a lot of pots and likes to make big, aggressive bets, you can make a better decision if you know what he’s up to before you make your move. So I was being careful, and trying to play my best game.

The dealer washed the deck, I watched the Cygnian. I'd—what? "Washed"? Don't worry about it. He shuffled, okay? I'd spent the last hour throwing away some decent hands, winning a small pot now and then to stay even, and studying the other players, and it was true what I'd been told: you just can't get a read on a Cygnian. His motions at the pot were small, precise, and absolutely the same whether he had the stones or nothing; except every time he'd been called he'd had the stones. The—

For G-d's Sake. All right.

"The stones." "The nuts." "The rocks." "The admiral's." The best possible hand under the circumstances. When I was holding that Q9 in my hand, if, at the river— I mean, after the last card—the board had been, say, 4 5 8 10 J, without any three of them being of the same suit, I'd have had the stones. Okay?

I was saying, then, that every time the Cygnian had been called, he'd shown down the best possible hand. The Martian colonial had found that out and it had cost him everything he had on the table. But Martian colonials are gamblers.

Martian colonials are gamblers, Cygnians are emotion-less odds machines that are impossible to read, 'Geusians are rocks, T'Cetians are calling stations, and on and on—I know I sound like a textbook on prejudice, but if preju-dice is all you have to go on, that's the way to bet until you get more information, and I always bet with the odds. But then, I'm Jewish.

I put out five imus for the small blind (you're on the big blind, then the small blind, then the button, in that order, and then your position gradually gets worse again as the button moves around the table), the other 'Geusian, who I think was female, put out the big blind, and the dealer whipped the cards around. The dealer was certainly female, and human, and attractive. Captain Billy only hired dealers who fit this description, which was one reason the Captain's Quarter was *the* place to play on Titan. Another was that everyone trusted Billy to keep the game safe and, within limits, friendly.

I protected my hand with my lucky 1921 silver dollar. I'm not actually superstitious, but it pays to make the other players think I am. Across the table, in seat 1, the spacer made it forty to go; spacers are typically even bigger gamblers than Martian colonials, and this guy played too many hands in early position, and raised on hands that didn't merit it. He was going to get broken sooner or later and I hoped I was the one who broke

him.

But it was the Cygnian I was worried about. It was the Cygnian I was there to break. It was the Cygnian who had what I wanted.

Hands hit the muck until it came around to seat 5, where a local, a small Oriental-looking woman, raised two hundred imus. Orientals, too, are often wild, hairy-eyed gamblers, but don't count on it; they can also be monsters, and I still hadn't quite gotten a read on this one. Two more hands hit the muck, and then it was up to the Cygnian, who peeked at his cards and quickly covered them again. Was that a tell? That extra quick hiding of his cards could mean he had a good hand, and if so, it would be the first tell I'd gotten off him ... he mucked his hand. Crap. A "tell" is just some mannerism that gives you a clue about what the guy's holding. Anyway, the 'Geusian mucked his cards, and I looked at mine. 9-3 offsuit. Some hands are easier to play than others—I tossed it into the muck.

The spacer called, and the flop came J—7—6 rainbow. The spacer checked, the local tapped, about fifteen thousand imus. The spacer said, "Over-betting the pot just a bit there, honey?" She shrugged, and he threw his hand away. The dealer dropped 5 imus, the max rake, and pushed the pot.

Oh. The "rake" is the percentage Captain Billy takes out of each pot—it's where he makes his money. He gets ten percent up to a maximum of 5 imus, which means that every ten hands he might make enough money to buy a piece of Mediterranean coastline. If you really wanted the Earth back, you'd open up a casino instead of trusting me to win it for you an acre at a time.

"How did you find me?"

"It wasn't easy. You move around a lot."

"Goes with the job."

"What do we call you? I can't pronounce—"

"Call me Phil. What do you want?"

"We want our planet back."

"Nice idea. How do you—"

“Poker.”

“Poker?”

“It seems to be one of four aspects of Earth culture the bastards have decided they like. The others are—”

“I know. Chinese poetry, Spanish dancing, and South Indian music. Northern Italian cooking should have been on the list. And Japanese pottery. I’m starting to guess where this is going, guys, and I don’t think you realize—”

“We realize. We’re hoping you’re as good as we’ve been told you are, that’s all.”

“Even if I am, what if I get unlucky?”

“Don’t.”

Now I had the button, so I could afford to take a chance, especially if the Cygnian was in. I had about twenty thousand—enough money to buy a small midwestern town, and say about the same as he had in cash—but he had a lot more on the table than his cash, so I had my work cut out for me if I was to break him. But that was what I was there for; that was why two people had died getting me this stake.

No, now was not the time to think about that.

This time the Martian colonial in seat 3 was up to his tricks again, making it a hundred to go. The Cygnian, with his small, mechanical motion, left arm relaxed in front of him, fingers still, head up and alert, eyes almost closed, pushed in a small, square, purple plaque and my heart skipped a bit. At the same time his voider said smoothly, “Raise. All of it.” The dealer took the plaque, dropped it into the ‘val machine and swung the screen so we could all read it. The screen flashed once then spelled out, “Padua, Italy: 19,385.”

I had enough chips to call, but I’d have to hit the flop hard. To my surprise, the ‘Geusian called. Well, that took out any notion of bluffing; for the ‘Geusian to call that size of bet, he had to be sitting on a monster. I looked at my hand: 6-3 of spades. Ouch. I wanted to call so bad I could taste it, but even on the button ... I sighed and threw it away, as did the

colonial, who had apparently learned his lesson.

The flop came A—4—4, two spades, and I almost cried. The Cygnian checked with no more or less enthusiasm than he had when betting, and the ‘Geusian slapped a tentacle down right behind him.

“Would you care for a drink, sir?”

I turned around. Cocktail waitress. There was a world outside of this table after all. Odd. I glanced around the room. There were six other tables busy, and about that number empty. The other games, mostly small stakes limit hold ‘em or seven stud, were being played just as earnestly as our own game; I was playing for a planet, some of them were playing to kill a few hours; but the game was the same either way; and the cards never cared. “Water, please.”

I returned my attention to the universe in front of me. The turn was the nine of hearts, and there was no betting. The river was the queen of diamonds, and I felt vindi-cated: no flush.

“Hands, please,” said the dealer.

The Cygnian turned over the jack of diamonds and the ten of hearts; the ‘Geusian showed two queens and took a lot of money along with Padua, Italy, and I felt a twinge. There was something there—something in the Cygnian’s body language. If I could figure out what it was, it was worth half a continent.

For the next hour I folded vigorously, even when the Cygnian put London, Ontario, Canada, into the pot before the flop and I was sitting on KQ of clubs; I watched, hoping that whatever I’d half-noticed would jump up and bite me. As long as he didn’t know what I was after . . .

“You have to try. He’s one of the richest men in the Galaxy, and by now he owns almost twenty percent of the Earth, and wants more. And, as far as we know, this is his only weakness.”

“Weakness?” I’d said. “It’s not a weakness. He’s good.”

“We know. That’s why we want your help. You’re good, too. We don’t know anyone else who can do it. Here, take this, and here’s a ticket to Titan City, where he’ll be show-ing up to play in a place called the Captain’s Quarter, where they accept real estate—”

“But what if I lose?”

They’d shaken their heads. They hadn’t wanted to think about that.

And it was the wrong thing for me to think about now. But how could I not think about it?

The hand where he bet London was shown down; he broke a local man in seat 6 who had AK when the flop came A-J-4, because the Cygnian had the jacks wired. It—sorry. I mean he had been dealt a pair of jacks, so when the jack hit he had three of a kind, whereas the local man had a pair of aces. Okay? It was a real bet this time, no bluff. If I could see him bluff, and see any difference in body language that indicated a bluff, I’d be set. If I could do it, that is, before my stake dribbled away, or I got clobbered with a good second-best hand, or some idiot made a bad draw that happened to hit.

No-limit poker is like that. No matter how good you are, you can get burned, and hard, and suddenly. It is terrifying. That’s why I like it.

The next time the Cygnian was in the pot, I raised behind him with an offsuit 8-4, then bet the flop, was check-raised, and exposed my cards with a grin as I threw them away. Yessir, Mr. Cygnian; I bluff all the time. No, really.

A new dealer came on about then; a redhead with a no-nonsense attitude and a tattoo of some sort peeking out from her left sleeve. The Martian colonial went broke and left; the Oriental woman went broke and pulled out more money; the rest of us stayed about the same for most of an hour, then I got my break.

To make it short, I called an unraised pot in middle position with 7-8 of hearts, made the straight at the river against the spacer who was slow playing pocket rockets— I mean he had wired aces and decided to pretend he was weak, hoping to win a big pot—the ‘Geusian who wouldn’t bet me out with top set but was willing to call all the way to the river, and three others who were hoping to hit something as long as it was cheap, which it was until I hit my straight. When the smoke cleared, I’d been paid off big, and I had enough chips in front of me to take on the Cygnian.

As I stacked my winnings I glanced at my watch, looked like I was thinking about leaving, then shook my head and settled back. I don’t know if anyone went for the act, but it didn’t matter. I was ready, now. I had the

chips I needed—now I needed either good information, or a lot of luck. I'd prefer the luck. I'd been lucky once against Doc Holliday and almost gotten shot at, and I'd been lucky once against Doyle Branson and gotten a cheap lesson. But you can't count on luck; over the long run, it always evens out. And I know a lot about the long run.

For the next hour, I ran a few small bluffs and showed them off, win or lose, and I also played a couple of small pairs that I threw away when I didn't flop the set—I mean, when the card didn't show up in the first three that the dealer flopped—but nothing much happened. Then, with the button in front of the Oriental woman, the Cygnian made it twenty to go, and, with the rock folding, I checked my cards and saw two red nines. I have a fondness for pocket nines, because they're strong enough so I can feel confident if I make the set, but small enough so that I can throw them away with a clear conscience if I miss and someone bets an over-card; and if there are no over-cards, I can be pretty sure someone has a draw for a straight. Pocket jacks, for example, are just the kind of hand that gets me into trouble. Also, the nines work fairly well against a large field, but have the advantage of being a slight favorite heads-up against over-cards, and a big favorite against a smaller pair. In this case, I wanted to be heads up against the Cygnian so I kicked it two hundred. It folded back around to him, and he called; I tentatively put him on two over-cards, or maybe a suited ace. That means, like, the ace-three of spades.

The nine of clubs was the first card off, followed by the ace of hearts and the six of clubs. The Cygnian, still leaning back, still with his small, neat, precise movement, bet five thousand imus.

I had to think about it. I had no doubt that I had the best hand right now; I'd be willing to bet my whole stack that he didn't have the set of aces. But . . .

Okay, if he had Ax of clubs, which seemed most likely, he was getting good odds to hit his flush, and would happily call a tap, and might even tap off against me if I raised. Whereas I would have two chances to pair the board to beat the flush even if he made it. I liked my odds, and normally I'd make him put all his money in and take my chances, only that wasn't what I was after this time. I wanted what he had on the table. I needed what he had on the table. The Association had put its collective and individual necks in a noose to get me the chance to get what he had on the table.

I was sweating. I was by G-d not showing it.

I raised him five thousand. He called. I wished I could read his

expression.

He *called*. What in blazes did that mean? What did he have? How do you get a tell from a creature with different psychology, different physiology? Why wasn't Madman Caro around to write about how to play against a rust-browened, scaled creature from thousands of light-years away? What would he have said? He'd probably have said that there must be similar enough psychology or the Cygnians wouldn't enjoy the game. Darn useful.

The burn and the turn, and we both leaned forward; his arms resting, almost human-like, on the table before him. As the card fell, I watched him, out of habit even though I couldn't read him, and found him watching me. For the first time, I wondered what tells of mine he was catching. I felt naked. What if he could read me, and knew I couldn't read him?

Three of clubs. If he had the hand I put him on, that gave him the flush, and I was chasing; I needed the board to pair. What would he charge me to look for the pair?

Forty thousand.

I could afford that; it was a good bet with about half that much already in the pot and the hopes that I could make a big score if I hit. Except that he had probably put me on a hand, too, and, if the board paired, he'd call me for the boat and wouldn't pay off, which meant that it was a bad bet. I mentally sighed and started to muck my hand—

—And noticed that his left arm hadn't moved. It was still out there, on the table, covering his remaining chips as if he were protecting them. It was his left arm—the beautiful hairless left arm, with its two elbows and skinny little wrist. I was in love with his left arm, and I watched it from beneath my baseball cap, keeping my eyes out of sight of his eyes. Baseball never made it off planet, but it was still played in empty lots and yards in places like Ontario, Canada.

Then there was a moment when my mind raced backward and forward, and put it together. He'd think I was putting him on this, so that he'd put me on that, so that. . .

"Call," I said.

And there it was: burn and turn: ace of spades. That's-a nice, as Chico Marx said. Marx Brothers movies should have made it off planet, too.

“I bet,” said the Cygnian, moving another plaque for-ward. The dealer slipped it in: “Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, 1105,643.”

Pittsburgh. I'd been there. One of the most underrated cities in North America. People who'd never been there thought of it as a graveyard of abandoned steel mills, but it was a beautiful city, and it would be good to have it back. I could just cover the bet.

His left arm was in his lap; he was no longer bluffing.

But, a moment ago, he had been.

So he really thought he had the winning hand.

So ...

Then there was the question of whether I trusted my judgment, or whether this tell was an elaborate ploy to get me to call down the nuts. What if he had, say, A6? Or even AA for that matter?

As I said, it was a question of whether I trusted my judgment.

“Call,” I said, and turned over my cards.

* * * *

What was it? It doesn't matter. It was a tell. No, I didn't see his hand; I didn't have to. I'd seen his left arm, out there resting on the table when he was bluffing, back in his lap when he really had it.

Yes, it was possible he'd had aces-up, and was bluffing the flush, and when the ace hit, that gave him aces full. But I just didn't think so. You see, when he bet the flush, he thought I had the flush, and he was representing a bigger flush. He was nervous about it, which meant he was afraid I had the best possible flush—which means I had the ace of clubs. And that meant he *didn't* have the ace of clubs. So what else could he have that he'd bet that way?

No, I never did see his hand, but it doesn't matter. He had pocket sixes, which meant when the ace paired he had a sixes full of aces, and he wasn't worried about my flush anymore. I called with nines full of aces and won. We'd both flopped sets—trips—three of a kind, only mine were bigger. Bad luck for him, good luck for you.

You still don't get it? Good. Want to play cards? Never mind. I've given you Pittsburgh, and London, Ontario, and half a dozen smaller towns. The rest? Well, the Cygnian is going to be on Mars in a few months, and there are places to play there. Give me a stake and I'll bring you Paris.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

No one can be familiar with my work and with Roger's and not realize how much influence he's had on me. Since I first encountered his writing it has been my desire to make others feel the way his work makes me feel. I hope I'm more than an imitator, but if not, well, I'm imitating one of the very best.

It was my great joy to know him in person as well as through his work, and I treasure every minute that we were able to spend together.

Ironically, perhaps, there is little in the above story that directly reflects his influence on me, except that I used the impoverished and sold-off Earth riff from "And Call Me Conrad" /*This Immortal*, and that one day at a World Fan-tasy convention I asked him how to write short fiction, which I've never been good at, and he said, "Write the last chapter of a novel," which is what I've tried to do.

I hope he'd have liked it.

I hope to someday write something half as good as his worst effort.

I hope new readers never stop discovering and falling in love with his work.

I hope.