Three Eights

by Craig Towsley

Dick peered at the lifted corners of his cards, looked over the river, gave each man still in the hand a quick glance and folded. He waited until the man across from him won with a low straight. He laughed at the man's joke and scratched behind his ear.

He fingered his remaining chips and the usual nervousness tingled at his spine. He tried to forget how much he owed already, and concentrated on the three grand he fronted for tonight's game. Dick was down to about five, six hundred. But he could tell that he was due for a win and tossed in his blind.

The other three men did the same. The dealer, to Dick's right, shuffled the cards while clamping down a soggy stump of a cigar. The man sitting across from him, back to the door, asked if anyone wanted a drink or anything and buzzed the girl.

There was a knock and the man stood up and stepped over and opened it wide. He asked the girl for a couple of beers and maybe some sandwiches if they had anything lying around. She said it'd be a few minutes to fix them up and he smiled broadly and magnanimously and told her to take her time, the four of them weren't going anywhere.

But as he turned around and caught Dick's eye, he yelled at her over his shoulder.

“Except for old Dick here maybe. He's about on his last legs.”

And he flashed a smile more reptile than human. Dick tried to laugh it off and swallow the sudden urge to run at the same time.

“Luck changes quick enough,” Dick said. “You know how it goes, Frankie.”

Frankie sat down and said he did. The dealer asked if they were done running their mouths and were ready to play cards. They were, the tension eased out of the room a little as he shuffled and dealt out the hand.

Dick held a pair of eights, clubs and hearts.

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The river dropped another, the diamond. He played conservatively. He checked until the flop. The dealer folded, then the man to his left. Frankie stayed in and checked. Dick did the same. He stayed small, seemingly allowing Frankie to bully and push him along. The pot was about two thousand dollars. Dick started to imagine.

The dealer was about to flip the last card over when the door buzzed. The men looked at each other, silently asking if they were finishing this hand or opening the door.

“I'm fucking starving,” Frankie said, and then turning to the dealer. “Get the door.”

The dealer stood up, stretched and walked over to the buzzing door. He pulled it open.

“Hello sweetheart,” he said. “What have you got for us?”

The blast from the shotgun sounded like a cannon in the small isolated room. The dealer flew back. Three masked men charged in, pushing the girl in front of them. They sat in her in the recently vacated chair.

“Palms flat on the table,” one of the men said as the other two spread out in opposite corners holding shotguns against their shoulders.

Dick wanted to scream. How could they do this now? Just as he was about to turn it around. Just as he was about to win and maybe wipe that shit eating grin off Frankie's face. He slumped in his chair, head hanging.

“Where's the stake,” the man said.

“Go fuck yourself,” Frankie said.

The man clipped him in the face with his pistol, breaking his nose. Blood bubbled and dripped. But Frankie kept his palms flat on the table. He looked across at Dick and his eyes narrowed.

“You did this,” he said to Dick. “You degenerate fuck. You owe money all over town and ran your mouth about this game as payment. I'll kill you myself.”

“I swear, Frankie,” Dick said, tears welling in the corner of his eyes and voice cracking. “I had nothing to do with it. I don't know

these guys. I was about to win. I could have broke even. I had three eights.”

Dick threw his pair face up.

“The take,” the man with the pistol said, interrupting. Frankie said nothing and shrugged his shoulders. The man shrugged himself and fired twice into the side of Frankie's head. He fell over, still stiff with his catholic school posture.

The man to Dick's left said the take was in the little room behind him and Frankie had the key. One of the shotgun bent down and went through the pockets. He found the key, unlocked the door and pulled out a steel till. He opened it, stuffing the cash into a small canvas bag.

The third man moved back to the door, as the second man made his escape.

The man with the pistol looked over the scene. He walked towards the woman and grabbed the deck. He burnt the first card and flipped over the second. Queen of Diamonds. He flipped over Frankie's hand and showed a flush.

“You would've lost,” he said to Dick and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.