

### Three Card Monte

By: Hamilton J Reed

"You know why they're called con games, right Marco?" I stop shuffling cards as I say this and turn to look at him.

"Well cause you've got to con stupid folk out of their money. It's right there in the name."

"Okay, fine smart guy. Do you know what con even means?"

Marco opens and closes his mouth a couple of times then shakes his head.

I sigh. "Con is shorthand for confidence. You gotta have confidence but more importantly whoever you've roped in has gotta have confidence they're not being made a sucker."

We're standing around a small folding TV tray that we found by the dumpster behind my apartment last week. On it rest two jokers and the king of hearts, face down. The backs are brown with the yellow logo of the hotel they're from. The flat concrete, dusty black asphalt, and the rough brickwork of the street are dull in the overcast light. It better not rain. Rain would kill our work for today. We wait but no one passes. Marco shifts his weight, keeps looking up and down the street.

"Hey, can we go over the drill again? Just to be sure."

I can hear the boredom and anxiety creeping into his voice. I

agree, to soothe my mind as much as his.

"Okay fine. When you spot someone coming up the street, we play a couple of rounds as they walk up to us. I'll make a gesture so you know where the king is. I'll make the game look easy, you throw the round, and then hopefully our mark will take the bait."

"Alright, cool cool. Sounds easy enough." He pauses. "How much did you say we'll make off of this again?"

"I dunno man. The guy I watched in the park down by the museum last week looked like he made close to a hundred bucks in an hour."

"Well why the fuck aren't we down at the park then? This place is fucking dead. I haven't even seen a goddamn dog in the thirty minutes we've been out here."

"Because you can't have two tables running games right next to each other. It looks fishy and you cut into each other's profit. Jesus Christ Almighty Marco you really are stupid. I can see why you flunked the eighth grade."

"Hey, I got chicken pox and missed six weeks. That's why I failed the eighth grade."

"Yeah, but you were already failing before you got sick." I turn to look at Marco just as his fist connects with my jaw. I can feel it shift left into the next county and I I taste pennies. There's a soft creak as my body falls onto the TV

tray. I can feel the legs give way under my weight. I get up and spit on the ground expecting to see blood. Only saliva sits pooling on the dead leaves thank God.

"Jesus Christ Marco what the fu-" Turning to face Marco all I see is him staring up the street dumbfounded. Following his eyes leads mine to three figures walking towards us.

"Oh shit. Marco help me get this set up again. I'll kick your ass later." He mumbles something that I can't quite catch but he comes over and helps me unbend the legs. The wind picks up and sends the card scattering so we barely have enough time to chase them down and get a round finished up just as the three men approach us.

"Tough turn there bud. Better luck next time." I catch the eye of one of the men. He's standing in front of the other two. Nice suit, nice watch, gold chain, and he's smiling. Jackpot. It takes all of my willpower not to burst into a grin. "Oh, hello sir, interested in a game? The rules are quite simple. Only a fifty dollar bet."

He looks back at the other two and laughs. His friends don't even twitch, just keep staring at me and Marco from behind their sunglasses. My heart is beating faster and my mouth tastes like a Warhead, but now his money is on the table. No way I'm going to back out now.

Flip the cards up. Joker joker king. Flip the cards

over. Pick them up, one in my left, two in my right. Shuffle them and drop. The steps echo in my head the same as the last two hundred times I've done it. I set them down. The man looks at the cards, then me, then points at the middle.

I flip and a joker stares back at us. The man frowns, looks behind him, turns back and laughs. "Well that's the strangest looking king of hearts I've ever seen. Son you might want to get a better deck." He starts to reach for the cash but I snatch it away.

"What are you talking about, that's obviously a joker." I flip the other two cards to prove my point. The king sits on the right.

The man coughs twice into his hand and his friends charge forward. They look like pit bulls, all snarl and slobber and rage. They run through the table, sending cards and cheap aluminum flying. Locked in place, I stare one in the eyes as he barrels down on me. The other peels off for Marco.

A fist connects with my torso. A thousand cheap metaphors of pain fill my mind. Spots, stars, then blackness fill my vision and all thoughts slip away. Seconds later I drift back into consciousness. I hear Marco groaning to my side. A pair of shined leather shoes fills my view and another steps in to join them.

"You little shitlords want to run a game on my streets,

you need to pay for the right." The dull blunt of oxfords dig into my side. I let out a soft grunt.

"You try to run a con on the Marioni's you pay the price." Another dig into my ribs. Blunt tips on stiff bone. "Now pay attention chucklefuck, we're talking business here." Another kick and a crack is almost audible. I'm pretty sure he just broke one of my ribs. Oh god he broke my ribs. A cry escapes my lips and I start sobbing quietly. It feels right, but each heave hurts my side. I can barely breathe.

"You jokers work for me now. So every fucking Sunday I want to see an envelope with a thousand bucks in it in the collection plate at Saint Marcs. And if one week it isn't there, I'm going to send my friends here to hunt you down and mail your heads to your mothers? Okay?" All Marco and I can muster are more groans. I close my eyes and loose myself to the pain. The last thing I hear before I pass out is Marioni.

"Remember; Saint Marcs every Sunday, every goddamn week, for the rest of your useless fucking lives"