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The Martingale

by Richard Lewis

“Could you cut my lawn?” asked Mrs McPherson.

“Of course,” Nathan replied.

“I can’t pay you much I’m afraid.”

“That’s alright,” Nathan gave a willing smile but underneath he was angry. On completing the task, dumping the grass cuttings, he felt something eating away inside him, rotting like the compost.

Brought up in the docklands of Cardiff, his parents lived a hand to mouth existence. Nathan survived by doing odd jobs for locals, placing what little he managed to save in a shoebox above the wardrobe, nestling alongside his medals. The war had ended three years previously and work was still hard to find. Tired of scraping by, he wondered how he’d ever escape the trap his life had become.

Nathan’s dream was to start a landscaping business but he knew his savings would never be enough and who would lend him the money? A bank loan was out of the question, he had no security and it was pointless asking his father. They had never got on and it had been a relief for both of them when he’d joined up in 39. He wondered about his grandfather who was more amenable, but still he felt it was bound to lead to trouble. First you borrow, then you beg.

‘When will it be my turn for a lucky break?’ he thought resentfully.

Nathan decided he would make his own luck and take a gamble. He’d heard about a sure-fire betting system known as the Martingale, often adopted when playing roulette.

The strategy had the gambler double his bet after every loss, so that the first win would recover all previous losses, plus win a profit equal to the original stake. This system could work well for those with deep pockets but for someone with Nathan's limited funds it was risky.

The strange world of Queens casino was way outside Nathan's comfort zone, yet after a few spins of the wheel he settled and felt lady luck was with him. Soon he was fifty pounds to the good. After the first loss, he followed the system, doubling his stake and sure enough the ball respectfully landed on black, returning his losses. Soon he was two hundred pounds up and wondered if he should call it a night but of course, he couldn't resist one more spin.

This time it was all or nothing. He placed all his chips on black and whispered a silent prayer. The wheel spun the one way, as the ball set off in the opposite direction. It rattled and bounced for what felt like an eternity, until the inevitable happened. The vindictive little swine had chosen red, the road to ruin.

Nathan quit the table in a trance. It was like a bad dream and there was no waking from it.

Then, as he ambled towards the exit, his eye was drawn to a young woman standing by the bar, smiling knowingly at him. He felt an instant connection, the shame and disappointment left him and he found himself smiling back.

As he went over to introduce himself, he thought, maybe this is my lucky night after all.