

# Shuffle

by Charles Benjamin Lovell

I am not the man I used to be.

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A thunderclap smashes through the raindrops tattooing my windowpane, rattling me awake.

11:30am on a Tuesday.

It has been raining for days. Not constantly. Not enough even. Just every day. Slickening afternoon asphalt. Coaxing tar and chemicals upward and outward into the atmosphere – a noxious air in the grey-green of early April.

Tuesday means Mass and then the familial lunch. Usual places with usual people. Oh, how he keeps up appearances. Confessional and coffee. ‘Forgive me father. I have sinned.’

Indeed you have. A carnal sin. One of the flesh.

Mine.

I mime this confrontation, searching through muddled light for something innocuous to wear. Anything forgettable.

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Thirty minutes and I’m posted sentry at the diner he frequents, peeping from behind Sports & Lifestyle like some sex offender on the lamb. There he is. Mom. Dad. Sister. He goes through the motions. To what end he is maintaining this charade, I have no idea. I watch the family raise a collective eyebrow when he orders. All wrong. Sugar in the coffee and then blueberry pancakes. Jesus. You’re gonna give me diabetes.

I sip mine black, hitching up the corner of my mouth when it hits the throat, wearing the bitterness like a badge. ‘Nothing for me, darlin’? I’m watching what I eat.’ She gives my skeletal frame the once-over and retreats to the shadows, missing the joke.

My afternoon is all slink and dart through the mist and puddles. Practicing my craft in storefront reflections and crowded transit stops. Honestly, this part is unnecessary. I know the

destinations. All of this sneaky-sinister Marlowe bullshit is for my own amusement. The remains of a life purely vicarious, so I'm milking that udder dry.

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7:50pm and I'm catty-cornered from his flat, holding up a streetlight by its post. A slow draw and then my smoke is curling cloudward, partially obscuring the lightbox theatre I've made of his kitchen window. Silhouettes in savage pantomime: him and the wife in some spat.

Likely, this row is the result of a detail he got wrong. Some feature fabricated out of necessity, which she has taken as an indication of deeper deception. Which it is – only, not the sort she suspects. I can only hear the higher pitches, hers mostly, staccato and skipping across the rooftops. That woman could always throw together a headache. Some things, you don't miss.

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I can't say why I pick the card game to end this. Something about the revealing of cards (the show/the showdown) seems apropos. Or maybe, I am just tired of stalking a life that used to be mine.

Securing a seat is easy enough. I know the right things to say, the best names to drop. This is still my town, after all, and the stranger that I now wear is convenient camouflage.

10:20pm and I'm across green felt from the eyes I had, until recently, viewed the world through. It's beyond creepy being this close. Horrifying, really. Like an obstinate mirror that refuses to function properly. A defective reflection. After an hour, my shoulders ache from trying to maintain composure. I get up to stretch, a long-haul trucker at a pit stop in a blizzard. My stomach is a fist.

He also seems agitated. Fingers sweating onto the cards. Any excuse for trips to the john, the bar. Too many. He must be fuzzy by now. Floating.

Texas Hold 'Em is a game of shared cards for a shared life. Five across the centre and two more for each of us. Down and dirty. A secret. Pried up at the corners as a reminder. Professionals discourage this sort of peeking. 'The cards don't change,' they say.

Oh, but they do.

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3:45am means the night sounds are changing: bugs to birds. Soon will be church bells and bread trucks. Whatever I thought would manifest from this close-encounter has failed to appear.

‘Do you know who I am?’ The words are through my teeth and across the table before I register it.

My reflection stares back at me.

‘...who I *was*?’ I amend.

Realization dawns on my former face.

‘You are... were... the man... *before*.’ He struggles with the verbs, the adverbs, the pronouns. The English language wasn’t built for such aberrations.

I nod. ‘And if you know that much, if you know there was a *before*, then you must know more. You must know a *how*. A *why*. Tell me.’ And then a gun is in my new hand, pointing at my old chest.

He is unfazed (relieved?) by this threat. As if he had expected something else. Something worse.

‘Do you know who it is you... occupy?’ Again, he is struggling with diction, but not out of fear.

Strangely, I have never given much thought to my... host. ‘No. A drifter, I suppose.’

He nods and swallows. Slowly filling his lungs in a way that inflates more than his chest.

‘Maybe this sort of thing is happening all the time. Maybe it always has been. Maybe we are simply broken and not worth fixing. If there ever was a master plan, it’s long since abandoned. We are an obsolete plaything winding down the last stored inertia of a rusted spring.’

Seconds pass between us like coded messages. And I start laughing.

Up from the table, and I’m headed out into the pregnant dark of the pre-dawn.

‘I thought you were going to kill me,’ he mewls, almost pleading.

I thought I was, too.

And I just can’t stop laughing.