

Good Money After Bad

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Chance Skinner stared past his reflected face and orange Lucky Strike tip at Sheffield Avenue's clatter of pre-game activity. Pearl-colored frost lightly blanketed bush tops and lawn fragments and asphalt. A program hawker blew into her cold hands. Spring, as usual, had teased Chicago with a few warm days, and then: buckets of ice and sludge and cold.

Chance moved laterally from one sill to another--matching double hung bay windows on either side of the entertainment center--and lit candles. He returned his gold Dunhill lighter to his change pocket. The candlelight mingled with Wrigley Field's yellow cellophane tint and the flicker of muted CNN to give the ragged place an alien glow. Darkness settled.

Chance stooped in front of the TV: in a thin horizontal strip below some image of world disaster or another, the early baseball scores rolled. The Braves led the Marlins, which was good, but the Angels-A's remained scoreless through two innings, which was bad. The White Sox scored twice in the top of the first--really good--but the Tigers gave up four to the Indians in the second--really bad. Chance possessed an impressive memory, and though his days and weeks and months blurred together he kept amazingly clear track of his far-flung bets, such that he knew instantly how a given bad-hop single or lucky basket or deflected goal might change his fate.

Chance straightened. He lit one Lucky Strike off another before dropping the first stub into a palm tree ashtray. He had celebrated his 26th birthday days before, but to look

at him you might have guessed 30 or so. Mostly it was the dark crescent moons under his poker-face gray eyes, and distinguished Chekhov-like silver specks in his shoe-polish black goatee. But it was also a composite expression, some spark of attitude that suggested he'd already seen plenty of car wrecks and fully expected to see more.

Cloudy rings glided in a single-file line toward the dangling smoke detector lid, broke up and came together again as silvery puffs among the red and black wires. Ordinarily, Chance would watch the Cubs on WGN while working the phone and clicker to keep up on every other game. But Gwen would be here any minute, and you never saw the personal ads begin, "SW crazed sports gambler seeks..."

Chance called Chicago's Free Sports Line. The phone service gave 10-minute updates from the first pitch of the night until the final out. At one time, Chicago gambling fiends paid fifty cents a pop to get results from a service called Sports Phone. Chicago's Free Sports Line drove that service out of business. But there was a catch: several minutes of gambling advertisements preceded the updates. "THE SUPER LOCK LINE DID IT AGAIN!!!"

The phone warmed Chance's ear. A scalper held up two fingers as a group of drunk, Cub-gear outfitted women passed. "This is Michael Prah ROCKING and ROLLING with 14 straight winners in the month of May. I have three more locks tonight. Call 1-800-685-1400." Shouts of "Peanuts. Get 'em outside" blended with batting practice cheers and the stadium organ. Chance tried to pick Gwen out of the crowd, but in the wispy blend of artificial and natural light that gave Sheffield Avenue its slightly sinful shimmer all the faces began to look more alike than distinct. "This is Sean

Sullivan from Sully Sports. I CAN NOT miss in the NBA playoffs. I have another Lock tonight, ABSOLUTELY free. Call 1-800-638-3411 to SLAM DUNK your man.”

The apartment rested below an enormous Torco billboard, and between Murphy’s Bleacher Bums and Sports Corner. A bar anchored every street corner surrounding Wrigley Field. Walking clockwise from Chance’s front door, you could connect the invisible lines of the square: Sport’s Corner, the Cubby Bear, Bernie’s, and finally Murphy’s. Smack in the middle sat the ballpark.

A springy brunette woman--Gwen?--walked alone up Sheffield. She never paused to check addresses and did not slow as she neared, and then she passed. “MAKE YOUR MAN WEEP. The Commander, Ray Richter, will torture your bookies tonight with ALL WINNERS.”

The moment he’d sat down in philosophy class, Chance recognized Gwen as the liveliest, prettiest, and smartest woman in class. She’d passed him a note that first day: “Epistemology over drinks?”, and when he’d looked her eyebrows were raised in an alluring, amusing, “Yeah?” expression. Things had progressed from there to here. Chance perpetually took academic classes in various fields, and jumped colleges when he defaulted on student loan or tuition payments. Eight years of that and he was no closer to a degree: a few credits in economics, some in math, a lot in English literature, a couple in political science. Computer engineering, architecture, painting, horticulture. History and interior design. Journalism.

The doorbell buzzed just as the scores finally played. Chance listened--the White Sox had added a run, Angels-A’s moved to the third still scoreless--as he made the four steps to the intercom. “Second floor.”

Chance slipped his private cordless phone into his jacket pocket. He tweaked his white carnation, and pulled open the door. Gwen held a bouquet of yellow tulips in one hand and a stack of mail in the other. A blend of coconut, hazel, tulip, and Ysatis blasted into the apartment. She wore her black bobbed hair deliberately mussed, and an extra dark shade of lipstick and eyeliner that made her face like a mask. Swatches of her chalky thighs peeped through a wrap-around peach cotton skirt while her entire midriff showed beneath a tied white blouse. An Indian shawl covered her shoulders and glitter dotted her cheeks.

“Flowers,” Gwen said, handing the bunch to Chance, “and your mail.”

“Thank you,” Chance said. They leaned into each other for a warm hug. Gwen said, “Mmm, you look great,” into his ear. Chance wore a two-button light gray flannel sports coat set off by a red silk scarf. His black peau de soie tie rested against an ecru shirt and silver beetle cuffs held together his sleeve openings. Inch and a half trouser cuffs rested atop polished calf leather shoes. Chance had inherited his Grandfather Skinner’s wardrobe, which was the plum in the estate of a fashionable alcoholic asshole, and then his father’s work clothes. So Chance’s vintage wardrobe reflected two generations of early flame outs, the former who’d idolized Bogey, Gleason, Sinatra, Newman and other Hollywood high-roller icons, and the latter who’d worked his hands raw in revolt against such waste. “You’re all dressed up.”

“I thought you might be worth looking nice for.”

In that light, he might have passed for a Hollywood B-list star. The unwavering gray eyes, curly dark eyelashes, strong jaw line and straight white teeth all pushed him toward leading man status. The dark rings, the pasty complexion, the too-small lips and

single eyebrow crafted a cartoon character. Somewhere between Cary Grant and Clutch Cargo, this side of Clutch Cargo, laid Chance Skinner.

He glanced at the envelopes: junk, junk, bill, junk, bill, envelope from Abbott Laboratories. He took Gwen's shawl and motioned for her to sit. Chance stepped through the arched doorway, across the dark kitchen, and into his tiny bedroom in the rear corner of the apartment. He lost the shawl, mail and phone. He returned to the kitchen. The el train screeched to a halt and the conductor's muffled shout--"Addison"--got lost in the giggle of fans cutting through the alley. In front, the ballpark. In back, the alley. Chance paused to watch the bluish-orange stove top flames. He flipped the light switch. Three 100-watt bulbs flooded the narrow rectangular room with eye-popping whiteness. Times like these, sultry urban dusk turning to standard artificial brightness, reality pulled into the left lane and passed Chance's ideal of his own life. It never bothered to turn on its blinker. Chance jammed the flowers into a Leprechaun vase, set them aside, then lifted the lid off the simmering sauce. He stirred the bottom and sides with a wooden spoon. He poured two glasses of Merlot and carried them, along with the flowers, into the living room, where Gwen sat knees parted on the barber's chair. He set the vase on the horseshoe coffee table, handed a wine glass to Gwen. He sat on the mushy avocado sofa.

"A man who cooks...that's an immediate plus."

"Strictly amateur," Chance said. "I mostly steal from chefs that really know what they're doing." Chance had completed two semesters at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, after which time he aborted his pursuit of an Associate of Applied Science Degree in Patisserie and Baking in favor of art school.

"Tell me what you do for a living again."

“I free lance.”

“Uh, huh,” Gwen said, somewhat suspiciously.

Chance’s work career, like his academic career, was a bloody highway. He’d worked as a sous chef, a copywriter, a photographer, a bookkeeper, a tourist boat docent, a librarian’s assistant. They were all low-paying, entry-level jobs that he quit in favor of different low-paying, entry-level jobs, or else abandoned—*made redundant*, he liked to say--at the height of a winning streak. Now, Chance collected unemployment and claimed, to anybody interested, to “free lance.”

“Tell me more about your data processing job. You work on LaSalle Street?”

“I’m a glorified receptionist.”

“Do the metaphysics and epistemology help with the filing?”

“Secretly, I’m thinking about a master’s degree, not necessarily philosophy, maybe literature; then hopefully a PHD. Maybe I’ll teach. I’m taking the long way around the block.”

Gwen looked around the place, as if for the first time. “I like your apartment,” she said. “It’s, like, cool. It’s filled with grandmotherly stuff.”

“It’s my grandmother’s apartment.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“You use your grandmother’s place as a stab pad?”

Chance shook his head no.

“You *live* with your grandmother?”

Chance shrugged: *what of it?* Gwen searched Chance's gray eyes for some further clues, but none were there. "I thought it was a deliberately kitschy look."

"She gets everything at garage sales; that's why nothing matches. She's a sucker for novelty items."

"A barber chair?"

"She got a great deal on it. Her philosophy is, you take the barber chair if the barber chair is the best deal—you can sort out what to do with it later."

"She's not going to walk in on us, is she?"

"Gram's at bingo—we've got three or four hours, guaranteed. Besides, you'd like her."

"That's not her James Dean poster?"

The *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* print, unlike everything else, did belong to Chance. He spent much time smoking Lucky Strikes and staring beyond the drizzle to a romantic back-story. "No," Chance said. "She's more into Tom Cruise."

Chance moved between the kitchen and living room. As he tossed tomatoes and croutons and Romaine lettuce and blue cheese into Gwen's wooden salad bowl, the National Anthem floated through the open living room windows. The two toasted a perfect evening together while a long, drawn-out groan--frustrated, a mother finding clothes on the floor outside the hamper again--chimed in its accompaniment. Chance, an expert at following the pushes and pulls of a Cubs game, pegged it as: bases empty walk to the opposing pitcher. Gwen brushed the back of her warm hand against Chance's hand, and a burst of I Told You So grunts and awwws slithered past the entertainment center to the coffee table: RBI double giving the Astros an early lead.

Chance ladled aioli sauce over a seared tuna steak, while a quick, enthusiastic roar darted through the apartment. Bases empty single for the Cubbies. Conversation focused on family biographies and the day-to-day blah, blah, blahs, while a half-warm cheer entered the apartment followed by a much hotter, faster cheer. Sacrifice bunt misplayed by the opposing pitcher. Chance broke off pieces of French bread as a ripple of noise entered the apartment: wild excitement, stunned disappointment, greater disappointment. Sizzling liner snagged by the first baseman, who doubled a runner caught off the bag.

Talk turned to past loves, philosophies of life, ambitions for the future, while hopeful oohs grew less hopeful by half, by half again, turned to awws--a home-run length fly ball that twisted foul. Gwen flirted openly, while the same sound pattern repeated itself, only with a longer, deeper aww at the end--another loud foul ball. As Chance, who'd worked for a time as a sommelier, uncorked a second bottle of Merlot, an ear-piercing scream of disgust charged past the couch and sustained itself several beats.

"Why don't I put on some music?" Chance glanced out the window as he picked out a disc from the canoe-shaped CD racks framing the entertainment center. Four or five people fought for the ball on Sheffield. A wiry teenager came up with the would-be souvenir, and promptly hucked it over the right field wall. Home run, Astros. Chance slid *Sinatra At The Sands* into the disc player, and adjusted the volume to conversational level.

"Can you believe it's fucking spring?" Chance asked.

"It was nice this afternoon."

"Still. I'd like to at least put my ice scraper in storage."

As Chance and Gwen moved together on the couch for their ice cream dessert, Harry Carey belted out *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* over Sinatra's *My Way*. The seventh-inning stretch. Harry Carey's cracked, jagged old voice, "I don't care if we ever get back..." battled Sinatra's velvety texture, "What's more, what's more than this..." as Chance spoke of a tragic childhood and stole glances at scores rolling and rolling. "I was a class clown," Chance said, mentally noting the White Sox were gold. "But the thing you don't know about class clowns is that we always feel pressure to make people like us."

"I like you," Gwen said. Her mouth twitched, and the television flashed dark then bright.

Chance fished three cigarettes from his side pocket. He carried his cigarettes loose rather than in the pack: it made for a more suave "here, have one of mine" gesture. He extended his palm toward Gwen, who declined. She turned her gaze from Chance's face to the TV screen and back again. "Is the TV on for a reason?" Gwen asked.

"I was just waiting to see if they said anything more about that Croatian offensive."

Gwen got up and turned off the power. She lifted the ice cream bowl from Chance's hand and set it on the coffee table, sat down closer to him, much closer. They kissed. As hands slid across warm skin, and clothes rustled, and tongues touched, a fierce awww resounded. Double off the wall, Astros. Several seconds later, buttons unbuttoning, shirts and blouses untucking, a louder sound of disappointment echoed off the apartment's cracked white paint. An RBI single, padding the Astros lead. As Gwen unbuckled Chance's belt, looked into his eyes, and said, "I want to make love to you,"

another awww penetrated the room, followed by a boo, and the faint chants, “Throw it back, throw it back.” Home run, Astros.

According to Chance’s calculations, the Astros led but not by an insurmountable margin. The Tigers were his key game, but he wanted the Cubs, too. He needed the Cubs. They had to come through. “I want to wait,” Chance said. He lifted Gwen’s hand from his burnished brass buckle.

Gwen stopped. She looked at Chance a second, then nuzzled his cheek. She ran her tongue along his ear lobe. She pulled back and looked at him again. “Let me get this straight,” she said, gently sliding an index finger down his chest. “You don’t want to have sex.”

“Yet,” he said. “I don’t want to have sex *yet*. I’m not ready. I want it to be perfect.”

“It’ll be close,” Gwen said.

“We’re both drunk, and it’s our first date...We both have to work tomorrow. I just don’t think it’s a good idea for this to go too far tonight.”

Gwen got ready to leave. Chance knew from his own experience that you didn’t go from serious foreplay to Tell Me All About Your Job Again. As he and Gwen kissed good-bye, long and passionate, a hopeful roar sounded, rose, rose, rose some more, then ended in a loud awwwww. Warning track fly out, Cubs. Chance closed the door and listened, forehead against wood, as Gwen’s footsteps faded away down the short tiled foyer, down a flight of stairs, and, he imagined, onto Sheffield Avenue. Chance scurried into the living room, flipped to WGN and turned up the volume. He stepped into his

bedroom, stepped out with the cordless phone under his chin and the Abbott Labs envelope in his hand. He heard Harry Carey say, “The Cubs are down to their last out.”

Chance hit speed dial one. He listened to the scores tape as he stood in front of the television. “Another UN-BE-LIEV-ABLE night for Chicago’s Sports Authority.” Ryne Sandberg flew out to end the game, making a loser of one big straight bet and killing three parlays. Chance felt his heart in his temples. He flipped to the Bulls-Hornets on TNT, and it wasn’t even close: the Hornets were sure losers, losers by the spread. Chance lit another Lucky Strike. A snowstorm of dollar figures and incomplete parlays and partial scores swirled about his head. In one frantic moment, he tried to think through how the night might turn out okay, and then conceded to big losses. It was like that moment between slipping and falling: Chance watched his own arms helicopter, his toes point skyward.

Chance, juggling the phone, envelope and remote control, flipped to CNN. Scores rolled on the bottom of the screen, and scores came through the phone. The Tigers lost--bad--and the Blue Jays came back to beat the White Sox—really bad!! The Braves won, but that wasn’t nearly enough to save it from being a bad night at the tail end of a bad bad week.

Chance sat. He ripped open the envelope--he’d passed his screening for the upcoming cold medicine study. He scribbled results in a note pad. He turned off the TV. The room went dark. It would be a long wait until noon tomorrow, when Chance could make more bets. His goal was no longer to win money on the week, but to reduce the losing total to an amount he could scrape together. That would buy him another week’s worth of credit.

The cordless phone's fluorescent green buttons beckoned Chance, and for a flash he considered calling Sophie. But he wanted to stop. She wanted to stop. They both wanted to stop. Why was stopping such a hard concept for Chance? He lay down the hot phone. He brushed silver glitter off his cheek with the back of his hand.

Chance would wake early to get the *Chicago Sun-Times* and check the pitching lines. He would send Gwen flowers. Gwen might think Chance gallant and old-fashioned. She might fall in love with the idea of a man so idealistic he'd postpone an animalistic urge until a more perfect time. Her thoughts of Chance would be different, no doubt, if she knew he had passed on sex to call for final results, then sat in his dark apartment thinking of his cousin's fiancé and scribbling Ws and Ls, pluses and minuses, in the margins of all his bets. Instead of a night of first-time fucking, there was addition and subtraction, the day's final negative total added to the week's running negative total, the new negative total circled and underlined and highlighted.