

Luckey Quarter

*In the fall of 1996, I crossed the United States from Maine to California on my Harley-Davidson motorcycle, stopping at independent bookstores to promote a novel called *Insomnia*. It was a great trip. The high point was probably sitting on the stoop of an abandoned general store in Kansas, watching the sun go down in the west as the full moon rose in the east. I thought of a scene in Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides* where the same thing happens, and an enraptured child cries out, "Oh, Mama, do it again!" Later, in Nevada, I stayed in a ramshackle hotel where the turn-down maids left two-dollar slots chips on the pillow. Beside each chip was a little card that said something like, "Hi, I'm Marie, Good Luck!" This story came to mind. I wrote it longhand, on hotel stationery.*

"Oh you cheap son of a bitch!" she cried in the empty hotel room, more in surprise than in anger.

Then—it was the way she was built—Darlene Pullen started to laugh. She sat down in the chair beside the rumped, abandoned bed with the quarter in one hand and the envelope it had fallen out of in the other, looking back and forth between them and laughing until tears spilled from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Patsy, her older kid, needed braces. Darlene had absolutely no idea how she was going to pay for them, she had been worried about it all week, and if this wasn't the final straw, what was? And if you couldn't laugh, what *could* you do? Find a gun and shoot yourself?

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Different girls had different places to leave the all-important envelope, which they called “the honeypot.” Gerda, the Swede who’d been a downtown corner-girl before finding Jesus the previous summer at a revival meeting in Tahoe, propped hers up against one of the bathroom glasses; Melissa put hers under the TV controller. Darlene always leaned hers against the telephone, and when she came in this morning and found 322’s on the pillow instead, she had known he’d left something for her.

Yes, he certainly had. A little copper sandwich, one quarter-dollar, In God We Trust.

Her laughter, which had been tapering off to giggles, broke out in full spate again.

There was printed matter on the front of the honeypot, plus the hotel’s logo: the silhouettes of a horse and rider on top of a bluff, enclosed in a diamond shape.

Welcome to Carson City, the friendliest town in Nevada! [said the words below the logo]. *And welcome to The Rancher’s Hotel, the friendliest lodging in Carson City! Your room was made up by Darlene. If anything’s wrong, please dial 0 and we’ll put it right “pronto.” This envelope is provided should you find everything right and care to leave a little “extra something” for this chambermaid.*

Once again, welcome to Carson, and welcome to the Rancher’s.

William Avery

Trail-Boss

Quite often the honeypot was empty—she had found envelopes torn up in the wastebasket, crumpled up in the corner (as if the idea of tipping the chambermaid actually infuriated some guests), floating in the toilet bowl—but sometimes there was a nice little surprise in there, especially if the slot machines or the gaming tables had been kind to a guest. And 322 had certainly used his; he’d left her a quarter, by God! That would take care of Patsy’s braces *and* get that Sega game system Paul wanted with all his heart. He wouldn’t even have to wait until Christmas, he could have it as a . . . a . . .

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“A Thanksgiving present,” she said. “Sure, why not? And I’ll pay off the cable people, so we won’t have to give it up after all, we’ll even add the Disney Channel, and I can finally go see a doctor about my back . . . shit, I’m rich. If I could find you, mister, I’d drop down on my knees and kiss your fucking feet.”

No chance of that; 322 was long gone. The Rancher’s probably *was* the best lodging in Carson City, but the trade was still almost entirely transient. When Darlene came in the back door at seven A.M., they were getting up, shaving, taking their showers, in some cases medicating their hangovers; while she was in Housekeeping with Gerda, Melissa, and Jane (the head housekeeper, she of the formidable gunshell tits and set, red-painted mouth), first drinking coffee, then filling her cart and getting ready for the day, the truckers and cowboys and salesmen were checking out, their honeypot envelopes either filled or unfilled.

322, that gent, had dropped a quarter in his. And probably left her a little something on his sheets as well, not to mention a souvenir or two in the unflushed toilet. Because some people couldn’t seem to stop giving. It was just their nature.

Darlene sighed, wiped her wet cheeks with the hem of her apron, and squeezed open the envelope—322 had actually gone to the trouble of sealing it, and she’d ripped off the end in her eagerness to see what was inside. She meant to drop the quarter back into it, then saw there was something inside: a scrawled note written on a sheet from the desk-pad. She fished it out.

Below the horse-and-rider logo and the words JUST A NOTE FROM THE RANCH, 322 had printed nine words, working with a blunt-tipped pencil:

This is a lucky quarter! Its true! Luckey you!

“Good deal!” Darlene said. “I got a couple of kids and a husband five years late home from work and I could use a little luck. Honest to God I could.” Then she laughed again—a short snort—and dropped the quarter into the envelope. She went into the bathroom

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and peeped into the toilet. Nothing there but clean water, and that was something.

She went about her chores, and they didn't take long. The quarter was a nasty dig, she supposed, but otherwise, 322 had been polite enough. No streaks or spots on the sheets, no unpleasant little surprises (on at least four occasions in her five years as a chambermaid, the five years since Deke had left her, she had found drying streaks of what could only have been semen on the TV screen and once a reeking puddle of piss in a bureau drawer), nothing stolen. There was really only the bed to make, the sink and shower to rinse out, and the towels to replace. As she did these things, she speculated about what 322 might have looked like, and what kind of a man left a woman who was trying to raise two kids on her own a twenty-five-cent tip. One who could laugh and be mean at the same time, she guessed; one who probably had tattoos on his arms and looked like the character Woody Harrelson had played in that movie *Natural Born Killers*.

He doesn't know anything about me, she thought as she stepped into the hall and pulled the door closed behind her. *Probably he was drunk and it seemed funny, that's all. And it was funny, in a way; why else did you laugh?*

Right. Why else had she laughed?

Pushing her cart across to 323, she thought she would give the quarter to Paul. Of the two kids, Paul was the one who usually came up holding the short end of the stick. He was seven, silent, and afflicted with what seemed to be a perpetual case of the sniffles. Darlene also thought he might be the only seven-year-old in the clean air of this high-desert town who was an incipient asthmatic.

She sighed and used her passkey on 323, thinking that maybe she'd find a fifty—or even a hundred—in this room's honeypot. It was almost always her first thought on entering a room. The envelope was just where she had left it, however, propped against the telephone, and although she checked it just to be sure, she knew it would be empty, and it was.

323 *had* left a little something for her in the toilet, though.

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“Look at this, the luck’s starting to flow already,” Darlene said, and began to laugh as she flushed the john—it was just the way she was built.

There was a one-armed bandit—just that single one—in the lobby of the Rancher’s, and although Darlene had never used it during her five years of work here, she dropped her hand into her pocket on her way to lunch that day, felt the envelope with the torn-off end, and swerved toward the chrome-plated foolcatcher. She hadn’t forgotten her intention to give the quarter to Paul, but a quarter meant nothing to kids these days, and why should it? You couldn’t even get a lousy bottle of Coke for a quarter. And suddenly she just wanted to be rid of the damned thing. Her back hurt, she had unaccustomed acid indigestion from her ten o’clock cup of coffee, and she felt savagely depressed. Suddenly the shine was off the world, and it all seemed the fault of that lousy quarter . . . as if it were sitting there in her pocket and sending out little batches of rotten vibes.

Gerda came out of the elevator just in time to see Darlene plant herself in front of the slot machine and dump the quarter out of the envelope and into her palm.

“You?” Gerda said. “*You?* No, never—I don’t believe it.”

“Just watch me,” Darlene said, and dropped the coin into the slot which read USE 1 2 OR 3 COINS. “That baby is gone.”

She started to walk off, then, almost as an afterthought, turned back long enough to yank the bandit’s lever. She turned away again, not bothering to watch the drums spin, and so did not see the bells slot into place in the windows—one, two, and three. She paused only when she heard quarters begin to shower into the tray at the bottom of the machine. Her eyes widened, then narrowed suspiciously, as if this was another joke . . . or maybe the punchline of the first one.

“You vin!” Gerda cried, her Swedish accent coming out more strongly in her excitement. “Darlene, you vin!”

She darted past Darlene, who simply stood where she was, listening to the coins cascade into the tray. The sound seemed to go on forever. *Luckey me*, she thought. *Luckey, luckey me*.

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At last the quarters stopped falling.

“Oh, goodness!” Gerda said. “Goodness me! And to think this cheap machine never paid me anything, after all the quarters I’m stuffing it with! Vut luck is here! There must be fifteen dollars, Darl! Imagine if you’d put in *tree* quarters!”

“That would have been more luck than I could have stood,” Darlene said. She felt like crying. She didn’t know why that should be, but it was; she could feel the tears burning the backs of her eyeballs like weak acid. Gerda helped her scoop the quarters out of the tray, and when they were all in Darlene’s uniform pocket, that side of her dress sagged comically. The only thought to cross her mind was to think that she ought to get Paul something nice, some toy. Fifteen dollars wasn’t enough for the Sega system he wanted, not by a long shot, but it might buy one of the electronic things he was always looking at in the window of Radio Shack at the mall, not asking, he knew better, he was sickly but that didn’t make him stupid, just staring with eyes that always seemed to be inflamed and watering.

The hell you will, she told herself. You’ll put it toward a pair of shoes, is what you’ll do . . . or Patsy’s goddam braces. Paul wouldn’t mind that, and you know it.

No, Paul wouldn’t mind, and that was the hell of it, she thought, sifting her fingers through the weight of quarters in her pocket and listening to them jingle. You minded things *for* them. Paul knew the radio-controlled boats and cars and planes in the store window were as out of reach as the Sega system and all the games you could play on it; to him that stuff existed to be appreciated in the imagination only, like pictures in a gallery or sculptures in a museum. To her, however . . .

Well, maybe she *would* get him something silly with her windfall. Something silly and nice. Surprise him.

Surprise herself.

She surprised herself, all right.

Plenty.

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That night she decided to walk home instead of taking the bus. Halfway down North Street, she turned into the Silver City Casino, where she had never been before in her life. She had changed the quarters—there had been eighteen dollars' worth in all—into bills at the hotel desk, and now, feeling like a visitor inside her own body, she approached the roulette wheel and held these bills out to the croupier with a hand entirely void of feeling. Nor was it just her hand; every nerve below the surface of her skin seemed to have gone dead, as if this sudden, aberrant behavior had blown them out like overloaded fuses.

It doesn't matter, she told herself as she put all eighteen of the unmarked pink dollar chips on the space marked ODD. It's just a quarter, that's really all it is no matter what it looks like on that runner of felt, it's only someone's bad joke on a chambermaid he'd never actually have to look in the eye. It's only a quarter and you're still just trying to get rid of it, because it's multiplied and changed its shape, but it's still sending out bad vibes.

“No more bets, no more bets,” the wheel's minder chanted as the ball revolved counterclockwise to the spinning wheel. The ball dropped, bounced, caught, and Darlene closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she saw the ball riding around in the slot marked 15.

The croupier pushed eighteen more pink chips—to Darlene they looked like squashed Canada Mints—over to her. Darlene picked them up and put them all back down on the red. The croupier looked at her, eyebrows raised, asking without saying a word if she was sure. She nodded that she was, and he spun. When red came up, she shifted her growing pile of chips to the black.

Then the odd.

Then the even.

She had five hundred and seventy-six dollars in front of her after that last one, and her head had gone to some other planet. It was not black and green and pink chips she saw in front of her, not precisely; it was braces and a radio-controlled submarine.

Luckey me, Darlene Pullen thought. Oh luckey, luckey me.

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She put the chips down again, all of them, and the crowd that always forms behind and around sudden hot-streak winners in gambling towns, even at five o'clock in the afternoon, groaned.

"Ma'am, I can't allow that bet without the pit-boss's okay," the roulette wheel's minder said. He looked considerably more awake now than he had when Darlene walked up in her blue-and-white-striped rayon uniform. She had put her money down on the second triple—the numbers from 13 to 24.

"Better get him over here then, hon," Darlene said, and waited, calm, her feet on Mother Earth here in Carson City, Nevada, seven miles from where the first big silver mine opened up in 1878, her head somewhere deep in the deluminum mines of the Planet Chumpadiddle, as the pit-boss and the minder conferred and the crowd around her murmured. At last the pit-boss came over to her and asked her to write down her name and address and telephone number on a piece of pink memo paper. Darlene did it, interested to see that her handwriting hardly looked like her own. She felt calm, as calm as the calmest deluminum miner who had ever lived, but her hands were shaking badly.

The pit-boss turned to Mr. Roulette Minder and twirled his finger in the air—spin it, son.

This time the rattle of the little white ball was clearly audible in the area around the roulette table; the crowd had fallen entirely silent, and Darlene's was the only bet on the felt. This was Carson City, not Monte Carlo, and for Carson, this was a monster bet. The ball rattled, fell into a slot, jumped, fell into another, then jumped again. Darlene closed her eyes.

Luckey, she thought, she prayed. *Luckey me, luckey mom, luckey girl.*

The crowd moaned, either in horror or ecstasy. That was how she knew the wheel had slowed enough to read. Darlene opened her eyes, knowing that her quarter was finally gone.

Except it wasn't.

The little white ball was resting in the slot marked 13 Black.

"Oh my God, honey," a woman behind her said. "Give me your hand, I want to rub your hand." Darlene gave it, and felt the other one

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gently taken as well—taken and fondled. From some distance far, far away from the deluminum mines where she was having this fantasy, she could feel first two people, then four, then six, then eight, gently rubbing her hands, trying to catch her luck like a cold-germ.

Mr. Roulette was pushing piles and piles of chips over to her.

“How much?” she asked faintly. “How much is that?”

“Seventeen hundred and twenty-eight dollars,” he said. “Congratulations, ma’am. If I were you—”

“But you’re not,” Darlene said. “I want to put it all down on one number. That one.” She pointed. “25.” Behind her, someone screamed softly, as if in sexual rapture. “Every cent of it.”

“No,” the pit-boss said.

“But—”

“No,” he said again, and she had been working for men most of her life, enough of it to know when one of them meant exactly what he was saying. “House policy, Mrs. Pullen.”

“All right,” she said. “All right, you chickenshit.” She pulled the chips back toward her, spilling some of the piles. “How much *will* you let me put down?”

“Excuse me,” the pit-boss said.

He was gone for almost five minutes. During that time the wheel stood silent. No one spoke to Darlene, but her hands were touched repeatedly, and sometimes chafed as if she were a fainting victim. When the pit-boss came back, he had a tall bald man with him. The tall bald man was wearing a tuxedo and gold-rimmed glasses. He did not look at Darlene so much as through her.

“Eight hundred dollars,” he said, “but I advise against it.” His eyes dropped down the front of her uniform, then back up at her face. “I think you should cash in your winnings, madam.”

“I don’t think you know jack shit in a backyard outhouse,” Darlene said, and the tall bald man’s mouth tightened in distaste. She shifted her gaze to Mr. Roulette. “Do it,” she said.

Mr. Roulette put down a plaque with \$800 written on it, positioning it fussily so it covered the number 25. Then he spun the wheel and

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dropped the ball. The entire casino had gone silent now, even the persistent ratchet-and-ding of the slot machines. Darlene looked up, across the room, and wasn't surprised to see that the bank of TVs which had previously been showing horse races and boxing matches were now showing the spinning roulette wheel . . . and her.

I'm even a TV star. Luckey me. Luckey me. Oh so luckey me.

The ball spun. The ball bounced. It almost caught, then spun again, a little white dervish racing around the polished wood circumference of the wheel.

"Odds!" she suddenly cried. "What are the odds?"

"Thirty to one," the tall bald man said. "Twenty-four thousand dollars should you win, madam."

Darlene closed her eyes . . .

. . . and opened them in 322. She was still sitting in the chair, with the envelope in one hand and the quarter that had fallen out of it in the other. Her tears of laughter were still wet on her cheeks.

"Luckey me," she said, and squeezed the envelope so she could look into it.

No note. Just another part of the fantasy, misspellings and all.

Sighing, Darlene slipped the quarter into her uniform pocket and began to clean up 322.

Instead of taking Paul home as she normally did after school, Patsy brought him to the hotel. "He's snotting all over the place," she explained to her mother, her voice dripping with disdain which only a thirteen-year-old could muster in such quantities. "He's, like, *choking* on it. I thought maybe you'd want to take him to the Doc in the Box."

Paul looked at her silently from his watering, patient eyes. His nose was as red as the stripe on a candy cane. They were in the lobby; there were no guests checking in currently, and Mr. Avery (Tex to the maids, who unanimously hated the little prick) was away from the desk. Probably back in the office, choking his chicken. If he could find it.

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Darlene put her palm on Paul's forehead, felt the warmth simmering there, and sighed. "Suppose you're right," she said. "How are you feeling, Paul?"

"Ogay," Paul said in a distant, foghorning voice.

Even Patsy looked depressed. "He'll probably be dead by the time he's sixteen," she said. "The only case of, like, spontaneous AIDS in the history of the world."

"You shut your dirty little mouth!" Darlene said, much more sharply than she had intended, but Paul was the one who looked wounded—he winced and looked away from her.

"He's a baby, too," Patsy said hopelessly. "I mean, really."

"No, he's not. He's sensitive, that's all. And his resistance is low." She fished in her uniform pocket. "Paul? Want this?"

He looked back at her, saw the quarter, and smiled a little.

"What are you going to do with it, Paul?" Patsy asked him as he took it. "Take Deirdre McCausland out on a date?" She snickered.

"I'll think of something," Paul said.

"Leave him alone," Darlene said. "Don't bug him for a little while, could you do that?"

"Yeah, but what do *I* get?" Patsy asked her. "I walked him over here safe, I *always* walk him safe, so what do *I* get?"

Braces, Darlene thought, *if I can ever afford them*. And she was suddenly overwhelmed by unhappiness, by a sense of life as some vast cold junkpile—deluminum slag, if you liked—that was always looming over you, always waiting to fall, cutting you to screaming ribbons even before it crushed the life out of you. Luck was a joke. Even good luck was just bad luck with its hair combed.

"Mom? Mommy?" Patsy sounded suddenly concerned. "I don't want anything, I was just kidding around, you know."

"I've got a *Sassy* for you, if you want," Darlene said. "I found it in one of my rooms and put it in my locker."

"This month's?" Patsy sounded suspicious.

"Actually this month's. Come on."

They were halfway across the room when they heard the drop of the coin and the unmistakable ratchet of the handle and whir of the

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drums as Paul pulled the handle of the slot machine beside the desk and then let it go.

“Oh you dumb hoser, you’re in trouble now!” Patsy cried. She did not sound exactly unhappy about it. “How many times has Mom told you not to throw your money away on stuff like that? Slots’re for the tourists!”

But Darlene didn’t even turn around. She stood looking at the door that led back to the maid’s country, where the cheap cloth coats from Ames and Wal-Mart hung in a row like dreams that have grown seedy and been discarded, where the time-clock ticked, where the air always smelled of Melissa’s perfume and Jane’s Ben-Gay. She stood listening to the drums whir, she stood waiting for the rattle of coins into the tray, and by the time they began to fall she was already thinking about how she could ask Melissa to watch the kids while she went down to the casino. It wouldn’t take long.

Luckey me, she thought, and closed her eyes. In the darkness behind her lids, the sound of the falling coins seemed very loud. It sounded like metal slag falling on top of a coffin.

It was all going to happen just the way she had imagined, she was somehow sure that it was, and yet that image of life as a huge slagheap, a pile of alien metal, remained. It was like an indelible stain that you know will never come out of some favorite piece of clothing.

Yet Patsy needed braces, Paul needed to see a doctor about his constantly running nose and constantly watering eyes, he needed a Sega system the way Patsy needed some colorful underwear that would make her feel funny and sexy, and she needed . . . what? What did she need? Deke back?

Sure, Deke back, she thought, almost laughing. *I need him back like I need puberty back, or labor pains. I need . . . well . . .*

(nothing)

Yes, that was right. Nothing at all, zero, empty, *adiós*. Black days, empty nights, and laughing all the way.

I don’t need anything because I’m luckey, she thought, her eyes still closed. Tears, squeezing out from beneath her closed lids, while

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behind her Patsy was screaming at the top of her lungs. “Oh shit! Oh shit-a-booger, you hit the jackpot, Paulie! You hit the damned jackpot!”

Lucky, Darlene thought. So lucky, oh lucky me.