

The Smell of Good Luck

Meg Mundell

[Double Six Casino, Waterfront, the Quarter]

It's Ladies' Night and he recognises her by type: optimistic posture, pastel handbag, hair scraped into a blondish puff. Eyebrows plucked to perfect brackets, skin gone soft under the powder; mouth slightly crooked like it's minus one cigarette.

The woman in the pale blue cardigan, the type who'll survive for years in the outer subzones armed with nothing but a slow blink and a sturdy pair of shoes. Not a big drinker, happy with her one free cocktail. No point in scanning her data, he knows. It's all there.

Carol begins to feel it: that kick to the heart when the roulette wheel spins, those black Pai Gow rectangles rattle under the dealer's hands, a slot machine surrenders and spits out coins. Even the flicker of goldfish in the foyer tank seems to promise something (but as always, she turns away on reflex at the sight).

Certainly there are fools in this place, and at first glance Carol could be one of them. But no: she understands probability theory, the fickleness of dice and the dangers of misplaced hope. Decades ago, before dropping out of school to cut strangers' hair for a living, she got an A-minus in maths for three years running.

Back then, she was still painting: watercolour dreamscapes, tropical fish vibrating against the walls of sunken wrecks. People admired them cautiously but never had room on their walls to make a purchase. Booked her for a haircut instead. Now she avoids staring into aquariums – the bright shapes give her an almost homesick pang.

But the maths is still useful. Every Friday night the women of Plane Gap tuck their free coupons into their purses and board a sponsored coach bound for the Double Six, one of the smaller casinos down on the city's waterfront.

At a quarter to nine, when Carol hears the troupe of heels clacking down the footpath, she turns off the TV, pulls on her coat and quickly does her face. Joins the shuffling queue where drifts of perfume intersect with the soft, disjointed buzz of exactly one week's news – missing nephews, rising rents, horoscopes and lucky

numbers. She climbs the coach steps, not quite catching the eye of her almost handsome driver; feels that quick thrill as the coach lurches forward and good old Louise gives her half-drunk whoop from the back seat. As they shoot through the night air, the subzones gradually retreat and the city's glassy skyline gets closer and sharper. The seat next to Carol is empty. Half of her misses whoever might have sat there, but her other half is thankful for the silence that allows her eyes to do their work, to track the flickering landscape through the dark glass.

A quick underground plunge, concrete rushing at the windows, and their vehicle surfaces into light. The skin of every building flickers with logos, messages, pictures. Down on the waterfront the casino blasts its furnaces into the black sky. The coach lurches over the speed traps and comes to a crouch beside a giant LED koala that scans the carpark with floodlit eyes. The women are ejected onto the warm tarmac and an escalator lifts them into the foyer, where a perma-tanned hostess hands them each a free cocktail voucher. Carol is carried up the escalator, a lone star zipping across a mute galaxy.

She knows the truth: gambling is an unlikely friend, a long shot that guarantees nothing but that vain kick of hope to the heart. But there's no denying the fact that someone has to win. If you keep filling your seat and playing the game, eventually your number will come up.

And while you wait something stirs its tail inside you – that dark, private swoop in your stomach, like you're riding some fast machine to an unknown place. Your shiny eye carries a secret mix of patience and impatience; you have tasted that potent sense of maybe, the power to throw everything into doubt. But you know how it looks: to the casual observer, you are nothing more than a rat with a hopeful squint.

As he watches Carol drop her first token into a pokie machine, her blue eyes scanning the cherries and horseshoes tumbling down its face, Milk knows he's found his barometer for the night.

[Intercept: internal msg system]

To jj@doublesix.com
From frankwon@doublesix.com
Subject Re: Fw: proposal

Ok what the hell I'm intrigued, set up a meeting. And do what he said with the lights plants fish etc.

Watch that new German croupier chick right I don't trust her. And James forget my spelling ok. you just look after the numbers

[Excerpt, audio interview, location unspecified]

Like certain colours make you hungry – that juicy tomato-red. Others calm you down, relax you. I can't get specific. You journos have your trade secrets too, right. Protect your sources, all that.

Ah, okay. Well this certain orange. Special mix, has to be right on the dot. It brings on a deep concentration, but with this strange flipside – almost Zen, only more reckless. This colour actually alters time perception: subjects can focus on a risky, repetitive task for long stretches without getting bored or spooked. Good casino wallpaper. That's just one example.

Yeah yeah, but it's more than psychology. Tuning is an art. Take an abstract painting: no subject matter, right? It's all colour and form, light and texture. We're affected by the painting because of how those elements interplay, the way the colours vibrate, the subconscious – sorry for the psych talk – the subconscious imprint of those specific shapes. That's what makes us feel something.

But you hang that beautiful painting in, say, a really foul-smelling room. What happens? The image gets tainted. At a subconscious level that beautiful picture stinks. People won't linger. It won't sell.

Now say you pair that image with a nostalgic smell – cut grass, baking bread. Or something more personal: the scent of a lover who never loved you back... Right, now you get it. Ouch, huh. Memory! Now that painting is hooked up to a completely different mood.

So every experience can be enhanced, shifted. That's what we do. A good moodie is an architect of atmosphere. He makes life into art.

Ah come on man. What about you? Your job paid for that watch – Gucci right, I can read the brand name from here. Why should an artist starve? What does that prove to you or me?

[Intercept: internal msg system]

To frankwon@doublesix.com
From jj@doublesix.com
Subject Re: Fw: proposal

Ok Frank it's your call. But why not just meet him? If he's a waste of time we'll show him the door. We're 9 per cent down on last year. Uncertain times etc. Hate to remind you, but unless we make some changes ourselves I see worry ahead.

Hey boss – is your spell-check on?

[Machine 1267, main floor, Double Six Casino, the Quarter]

From up here he can monitor the whole place: every blind corner, the gaps between a patron's fingers. A croupier's blink, the tone of a bartender's voice, blood jumping all nervous in a young gambler's veins.

Black one-way glass fronts the tiny booth. In its surface Milk is a pale streak hovering over screens and consoles. A bank of monitors brings the whole room under his gaze. He checks the drive, aligns the scent vials, adjusts his silver airbox, double-checks the cables snaking off into the casino's ventilation system.

The set-up is not ideal. Milk's equipment is factory fresh and customised, but the casino's gear is older; where the two meet he's had to improvise with duct tape. And the boss had shot him a hard-eyed look when he said he always works alone. The guard was eventually sent away, but in his place is the black stare of a surveillance camera. Milk glares back, then looks away. He works best invisible.

Ignore it. Focus.

The Milkboy is ready. For luck he's wearing new sneakers, spotless white pumas. He reminds himself: no one else on this planet can claim his particular mix of skill and intuition.

The floor is busy and it's impossible to watch everywhere at once. He needs one average gambler, midway between a first-timer and a lost cause, to be the room's emotional barometer. Once a mood starts to roll through a space a strange kind of automated beauty will take over. Tune your test bunny, goes the theory, and the rest will follow.

Carol's face fills a monitor screen: tidy eyebrows, complimentary cocktail. Near the middle of her life, plays a bit of this, a bit of that – hopeful, but not a complete sucker. Never had a fancy job or shot junk up her arm. An optimistic tilt to her head, a hint of individual will behind that familiar foolish gleam. Milk checks his controls, clears his mind and zooms in.

baseline check: heart-rate 72 | base spend: \$2 per min...

glow soft amber | low metal slush | gold tumble plastic cup | bird chirps tiny bells | oh nice | spend: \$4 per min...

scent: four-leaf clover | glow: warm amber | subsonic applause | low gold slush | ching click whirr | \$5 per min...

jasmine | dreamsound 14 | smell of velvet | tickle of dice | skin of a dark-haired man | gunpowder | mmmnice | heart-rate 86 | ching click whirr | \$8 per min...

Oh yes, thinks Milk. Very nice.

[Intercept: internal msg system]

To jj@doublesix.com
From frankwon@doublesix.com
Subject Re: Fw: proposal

Heard about this stuff. Couple of big joints in Japan use these guys to mess around with the room, minipullate the lights whatever. But dunno sounds like bullshit...
Paying enough staff already

[Machine 942, main floor, Double Six Casino, the Quarter]

Three cherries, thinks Carol, three cherries means I cut my hair into a bob and stop eating cheese after 7pm (causes weird dreams, goes straight to the hips.) A snappy little bob and a summer tint maybe. Come on, come on... Pft.

Oh Jesus. Did I turn the gas off? Bet the battery's flat in the smoke alarm... Right, if I get a spade now I'll get back tonight to find the house burned down, and the Elliots' place, and the next one along... No spade, no spade, please... Whew. Heh. (Silly: don't think like that.)

Now. If a heart stops in the middle, that means he's thinking about me. Or I get a clover on the left. Heart or clover, he's thinking of me right now.

[Excerpt, audio interview, location unspecified]

Sure, it's your job to ask questions. But you'll paint the wrong picture if you misunderstand the motive. Earning a living isn't... Okay. Forget it.

Yeah, a very new field. But the potential, I mean take hospitals – you've got sick people, women giving birth. Newborn babies, kids getting tonsils out, guys having heart surgery.

So what do they get? Blank corridors, fluoro lights. And that smell: sickness and antiseptic, lukewarm plastic, boiled scalpels. Just a big people factory, a setting for bad dreams. Get well soon... I don't think so.

Now imagine gentle light, warm colours, low-frequency sound pulses. At night, for the insomniacs: waves on a beach, so soft it's almost imperceptible. You pipe in a subtle mix of ozone, jonquils, cut wood, maybe a hint of human breastmilk. Jonquils are guaranteed. Very few people can recall a negative experience with jonquils.

Right, the cancer ward: you synthesise each person's unique childhood scent, the exact smell of them in perfect health, dab it their pillow. Grandpa wants morphine – you give him colour saturation, audio therapy, internal projections.

Surgeons, always exhausted right? So you tune the operating theatres to keep them alert. More skill per hour. The drop in medical misadventure suits would pay for the whole thing.

Of course we don't. That's illegal.

Not really. Mostly, ah, shopping centres so far. But that's my point: the infrastructure's there, we just have to realise the potential.

[Main floor, Double Six Casino, the Quarter]

Three hours into Milk's shift the casino is humming, but despite his best efforts Carol has left her blackjack table and headed for the bar. Doubt flickers through him: she didn't look like a drinker. She still has credit, he'd set her into a nice rhythm and according to his calculations she should have stayed put.

But his human barometer, with her neat hair and cheerful handbag, has abandoned her seat and wandered away, distracted by something invisible. Milk has no idea what.

But so what? It's not personal, and his test rabbit has done her job. So he scans the room for another breed of subject.

Milk has made progress. The electricity in the room is fizzling somewhere near hip level. The grim downward slant repeated across each pokies player's mouth has tilted upward by half a degree. He shoots out a squirt of peppermint to mask the sour feet of a baccarat player; women unwrinkled their noses and the seats near him begin to fill again. He spots a Chinese woman in a red dress, stacking her tigers high, and outlines her shape in rosy velvet; three men soon converge. An elderly couple playing craps look limp and jaundiced so Milk softens their light, gives them a shot of oxygen. Any reminder of death, that futureless place where loot counts for nothing, must be banished.

In the Mahogany corner a tall Caucasian in a charcoal Savile Rowe suit eyes the roulette wheel, hands behind back. Deep-set Spanish eyes, slight stoop, bony shoulders poking at the fine wool of his jacket.

Money. Milk studies the man's gold wedding band, his watch. (But the cameras can't penetrate the cloth of those well-cut trousers; the sensors miss the tiny creak of the prosthetic limb strapped, not quite comfortably, below the man's knee joint.)

This one could absorb a decent loss: an extraction is called for. But first the entire room needs an extra push. Milk picks a young, good-looking group playing blackjack for a laugh; amateurs with university degrees and Italian shoes, slumming it amongst the tracksuits and perms, the gold flash and grim jaws.

When a caramel blonde solicitor draws 21 twice in a row, winning enough to buy the suede heels she spotted downtown this morning, Milk magnifies their whoops, flicks an acoustic pulse through the air and fills the whole room with scent 42: Competition. It smells like the start of a race.

The room turns to watch – the girl’s head thrown back, laughing; her friends touching her, shouting wordless delight. Adrenaline ripples across the floor. People lean forward, chips hit felt, cards flip. The casino’s take spikes sharply.

But Milk sees he’s overdone it. Some of the croupiers have lost their detachment – they’re dealing too fast, calling too loud. One young dealer, eyes too bright, scrapes away chips like a squirrel scooping nuts. A punter protests sharply, a supervisor hovers.

It takes Milk half a nervous minute to restore calm. A slow, subterranean heartbeat issues from his fingers and the pattern shifts slightly, the fright dissolves. Angles collapse into curves. The room steadies. *Focus*.

Carol calculates her credit burn and lets herself choose a third cocktail, a Silver Bullet – the nickname, she remembers, of the star of some TV cop show she used to watch as a kid: stocky guy with a crew cut, patrolled the badlands, always got shot at, but never got hit. Good-looking guy who lingered in your head long after the TV was turned off.

Now something is calling Carol outside. With the dark swirl of alcohol in her blood she disengages from her barstool and weaves through the jangle and flash, across the coin-spangled carpet, out to the balcony. She lights a cigarette and watches the carpark, the koala sweeping the night with its searchlight eyes, the people streaming up escalators and trudging down stairs. It all fades out: in a quiet corner of her mind sits something to dream about, something private.

Milk lets her go. He homes in on the tall man in the fine suit.

[Intercept: internal msg system]

To frankwon@doublesix.com
From jj@doublesix.com
Subject Re: Fw: proposal

No idea Frankie, your internal address is protected. Never heard of this guy and dunno what his game is. But I’m curious. What you think?

[Mahogany corner, Double Six Casino, the Quarter]

The tall man stoops over the roulette table, one hand in his pocket, twirling his wedding ring on one bony finger. Since the crash, she farewells him from the porch whenever he leaves the house; arranges the specialists' bills on the table, neatly marked up with a yellow highlighter pen; makes him listen in on the extension every time she negotiates with the insurance company. Cooks the meals he used to love, reminds him of his exercises. And tries not to turn away, he thinks, when the light goes out.

Milk just sees a tall guy with one hand in his pocket, a sure sign of holding back. He reads him again, notes the watch, the sharp attire, the high-denomination chips. Takes it all in. And begins.

glow: rose gold | scent: four-leaf clover, smell of good luck | subsonic: yesbigyesbigyes | a rise a roll a swell...

A neat flick of the dealer's hand has set the wheel in motion. The players set down their chips, the lanky guy stooping forward to stack his monkeys on eight; the ball spins, jitters, drops to silence. The dealer calls: 'Number nine.'

subsonic: almost! | cognac glow | smell of good luck | an urge a surge a swell a dip | saltwater | subsonic: bet it all | scent: black licorice musk petrol | accelerate | subsonic: luckluckluck | tic-tic-tic...

The wheel is back in motion, the ball dancing around its rim, almost weightless. The dealer calls last bets and in one smooth movement the tall man leans forward and slides everything – five tall stacks of \$500 chips – back onto number eight. Then his black eyes watch the wheel and its jittering passenger almost politely, like everything is settled.

But the ball drops into the slot on 26.

The croupier leans forward and scrapes away the plastic towers with a mechanical flourish. It's all gone. He can afford it, Milk reminds himself quickly, feeling his own pulse flicker with adrenaline. That amount is nothing to a guy like him. So fast, he can't help thinking, I got him so fast. He zooms out. No need to keep watching the guy.

The man just stands there with an empty face: some false certainty had swept through him, quick and tidal, leaving nothing in its wake. Deep in his pocket his mobile shivers and shivers, like a small sick animal. His wife always knows. This time he'll have to admit it, and everything will unravel from there.

[Intercept: internal msg system]

To jj@doublesix.com
From frankwon@doublesix.com
Subject Fw: proposal

James – this msg just came out of nowhere. Who the hells this guy? Does this sound like something viable? And how did he get this address, thought you said it was private?

[Excerpt, audio interview, location unspecified]

Good question. I'd say no, but it depends on the person: you get bad eggs in any profession. Remember that fake reporter, the Boston Headliner? Doctor Cyanide... and that hypnotist lawyer? There are sick people in every field my friend, even journalism. But as a general rule... good people with true talent will use that talent for good.

No photos. Man, we discussed this already – anonymity. Moodies have to be unobtrusive, subtle. We're not, you know, celebrities.

But you can use my first name. That was the deal, right? You promised to use my name.

[Intercept: BREACH internal msg system]

To frankwon@doublesix.com
From milkman@mood.com
Subject proposal

Dear Mr Curillo,

I realise you are a busy man who cannot waste his time on vague promises.

So here's a solid promise: I can increase your profits in the main room by a minimum 12 percent (that's after my fee is paid). No increase as promised, no fee.

My proposal relates to the environment of your establishment. I hope you won't take offence when I say there are many potential enhancements that would boost Double Six's ambience, reputation and profit margin.

About me: I'm male, full ID, clean papers, no record. My work is legitimate. In my other life I'm an artist, and I like to think there's an element of art in what I do for a living.

If you're interested we can meet.

Milk

PS Re: your frontage – I recommend you replace your harsh globes with rose-frosted 70-watters, and the scrappy plants with a shiny broad-leafed variety (real, not fake). You'll see an immediate increase in patron retention. Your koala needs new lasers and there's a dead goldfish in the foyer tank. I'd remove that immediately.

[Coach 261, pickup, Double Six Casino, the Quarter]

Out on the balcony Carol is draining her third cocktail and performing calculations in her head. She spilled over as usual, but the rent is safe. Just.

The casino fades out as her mind heads for its own warm, dark corner. Her bus-driver: tonight he greeted her by name. Just below eye level, pinned to his shirt, is a laminated photo-ID, which she's always too shy to scrutinise. He could be anyone. But she recalls the details – the dim blue of old tattoo ink against a white cuff; his eyes, pale as gravel, tilting up as she hands over her ticket; that half-moment of skin contact. His eyes always land first and fix steady, but hers arrive late and jump away fast. Neck, hands, skin. Tiny bus windows reflected in black pupils. She remembers it all clearly.

Down there: a sharp horn blast, the flash of headlights. A second of shame as she recognizes that shape down there behind the windscreen, arms slack across the steering wheel. That face tilted up at her, pale grey eyes watching from the blue space of the waiting coach. Arranging her face back into privacy, pushing away the imaginary smell of his skin, Carol hurries down to the carpark and climbs aboard the rumbling machine.

He could be smiling. ‘Sorry to startle you,’ he says. ‘These ladies put me up to it.’ Carol glances around: a non-committal shrug, an indifferent look, one woman dropping into sleep. With nothing to say, she takes the empty seat nearest to him.

The women and their driver roll out onto the highway, sweeping the night behind them. Light by light the city blinks out, and the dark hush of the subzones begins to fill the coach windows. Carol can’t read his name from here, but their eyes connect briefly in the rear-view mirror. Something shoots through her, bright and quick. A little subtraction is nothing, when you weigh it up. She’ll be back next week.

heart-rate: 92 / slow acceleration / spend: zero per min

[Taxi 91163, pickup 19, Double Six Casino, the Quarter]

It’s dawn when Milk finally makes for the taxi rank. Walking home would clear his head, but he can’t risk his equipment in the streets.

The big boss had come down personally to shake his hand, give him a box of expensive cigars he’ll never smoke. Then he offered him a job working the high-roller rooms and introduced him to an embarrassed lingerie model. Milk had slipped away with a polite promise to return.

He’s exhausted by the thousands of moments he’s processed. He tries not to swallow the emotions of strangers, but he always gets too close.

A fine rain sifts over the casino carpark. There are bodies in some cars: a small dog, two sleeping toddlers, a child sitting motionless behind the wheel of a battered ute. In the grey morning light the koala mascot is just a concrete lump, its sparkle switched off at the mains. Under its bulk a streetkid is sheltering from the drizzle. She squints at Milk as he passes, lifts something silver to her eye. On reflex he turns his face away. Stolen camera, he thinks, tightening his grip on the handle of his case and signalling a taxi.

The driver is wearing a spotless lilac turban. Windows rolled up tight, they slide past the pier where a tall, well-dressed man with an almost imperceptible limp is watching the oily water, into which he’s just dropped his phone. How deep will it sink before it stops shivering? Can a machine drown? He’s rehearsing a conversation in his head, a conversation that will begin when he wakes his wife to tell her there’s a taxi driver outside their house who is waiting to be paid. Anyone

who caught his eye would notice a peculiar lack of light in there. But no one does: he's just a man in a suit, looking the other way.

Milk is bothered by a vague, faceless need. Tonight something changed, something that proved certain people were wrong, certain plans were clicking into place, his own brand of poetry was taking a solid form. So why this itch?

Then he sees the smudge of dirt across the toe of his new sneaker, the left shoe. He scratches at it but the mark stays put. Pressing the intercom to speak to the driver, Milk feels his anxiety begin to dissolve, his blood to slide back to its regular rhythm.

New shoes, he thinks, as he gives directions to the all-night mall. And after that, who knows. Perhaps he'll just keep driving.

This short story is an extract from Black Glass, a novel-in-progress.