Winter 1957

The Hustler

Gene A. Castle

Western Michigan University

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Recommended Citation

Castle, Gene A. (1957) "The Hustler," Calliope: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 34.
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol4/iss1/34

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The Hustler . . .

by Gene A. Castle

The day-room was motionless and still, like a cake that was wait-
ing to be eaten. A light burned dimly, a light not meant to illuminate
but placed there merely because rooms were supposed to have lights.
A history of the past decade was present in the Time magazines lay-
ing coverless on the floor. A few chairs and a chrome-clad studio
couch, new enough in period to be modern, but in such bad physical
condition to be called junk, were planted around the floor like the
instruments on an offbrand dashboard.

The screen door flapped and a soldier entered. His hat was blocked
in the style of the regiment and the tailored uniform smacked of
regular army. He picked up one of the Time magazines and started
to read the predictions about the coming presidential election. Looked
like “Ike” in a walk, he thought, better get some dough down. He
threw down the magazine and lit a cigarette. He rolled the end
around in his mouth and cupped it with his hand as he drew large
mouthfuls of smoke into his lungs. He picked up the Time again.
Better look like I’m not waiting too hard, he thought. No sense in being
too obvious. This will be four paydays in a row I’ve cleaned ’em.
Better let ’em wonder a little. What a batch of live ones in this camp
. . . and I thought I wasn’t gonna like it here.

He thought back about the other times. Sgt. Snow, the fatalist,
too nonchalant, too come-what-mayish. What the hell he don’t even
know when to stay. The original get-it-over-with-quick guy. Win or
lose, one or the other, but get it over with quick, make it quick. Sgt.
Davila, let me cut, they gotta be cut. Cut and then cut right back, what
a jerk he is. He thinks cuttin’ is all you gotta do to keep the game
honest. Cpl. Fairey . . . maybe he is . . . the only thing he needs is a
fifth of whiskey and an over-sexed blonde and he wouldn’t have to
lose his paycheck every month to prove he’s one of the boys. And
those damn twins—they’re the ones I gotta watch. Send the money
to ma, Jesus, let her work. I get tired of that “how about givin’ me
ten.” If they want dough, let ’em keep some. Sure, lose a little, keep
a little; I don’t want all the dough they get.

“Hi, lucky!” It was Sgt. Snow.

The hustler looked at him like he had interrupted a very per-
sonal conversation. “Oh, whata ya say pal, I just thought I’d catch
up on the news,” he said.

“How about a little game?” said the sergeant.

“O.K. with me,” said the hustler. Funniest thing, he thought, bout
like one of them young chicks on her first date with a soldier, they
act unprepared and casual but they know all the time what’s gonna
happen. I bet his heart was poundin’ all the way over here.

A helmet liner came sailing through the door. “I’ll kick ya in
the moon if ya ever do that again, even if ya are my own brother.”
"Aw hell, Jim, I just said you drank a little."
"Yeh, but you know how that worried ma. She's liable to have an attack or somethin' if she thinks we're out here whorein' around."
"O.K., I'm sorry; I won't do it again, I never meant no harm."
Jesus, thought the hustler, the old lady probably had a bottle stashed all her life, probably that's why the old man left, couldn't go the booze rout. What a coupla jerks.
"Where the hell's the fairy?" asked one of the twins. "We could have a little game if he'd show up."
"Probably over in the orderly room with his nose up the captain," said the other.
"Naw, I saw him at chow," said Sgt. Snow. "He said he'd be over as soon as he took his A's to the cleaners."
Time I get done with him he won't have no money to get 'em out, thought the hustler.
"Ever see this one?" asked one of the twins. "Pick a card; go ahead pick one." The hustler took one. After piling and counting and figuring to himself, the twin turned a card. "Six a dimonds, is that the one?"
The hustler felt mean. "Hell no," he said.
"Geez I musta miscounted," said the twin.
Yeh, miscounted, they miscounted when they passed out brains, thought the hustler, didn't have any left over when it came to him.
"Here's Fairy!" said Snow. "Deal 'em."
"Sure, deal 'em boys," said Fairey. "I'll win a pile and go to town and have a gay time."
They sat down to play after the usual relocating of the furniture.
"Where's that cushion? Can't play without my lucky cushion," said Davila.
Lucky, huh, lucky to be livin', you stupid spick, thought the hustler.
They cut for deal. Sgt. Davila won. It was the one hand the hustler didn't mind losing nor did he have any control over it. Even the best have to touch the cards before they can control them.
"Same as last time? Two dollar limit, three raises, and the limit on an open pair or last card. Right?" said Davila.
He knows the damn rules anyway, thought the hustler.
Davila riffled the cards and put them down for the hustler to cut.
The hustler waved him on. "Naw cut 'em," said Davila. "They gotta be. Then if I win nobody will have any kicks coming."
"Sure pal," said the hustler, and he was tempted to cut them one-handed. Cheat, huh, I'll do the cheatin', me and nobody else.
The game was five card draw and the hustler got a chance for an open end straight. "Pass," he said.
"Pass," said one of the twins.
"I'll crack it," said the other. "Two bits."
"Raise it two bits," said Snow.
"Out," said Fairey.
"Out," said Davila.
"I'll try you once," said the hustler.
"How many?" said Davila.
"One," said the hustler.
"Can ya draw five?" asked the first twin, and he threw his hand in the discards.
The twin that opened said, "Give me one."
Snow said, "One."
"O.K., bet," said Davila.
"One dollar," said the twin.
"Make it two," said Snow.
The hustler squeezed his cards looking at the jack he had when he drew. Then the ace he didn't have came in and he smiled to himself. "Make it four," he said without emotion.
"Geezus, what the hell you got? He don't stay unless he's got 'em," said the twin. He glanced around the table trying to salvage some advice out of the eyes that glared at him. "Call," he said and threw in three more dollar bills.
Snow ran off two bucks and then another two. "I didn't get in here to call," he said.
The hustler quickly threw in the last raise and he felt prepared to hate Snow if he won. He didn't very often have the helpless feeling of wondering if the cards he held were good enough.
The twin grinned sickly and called.
Snow threw down an eight high straight. The hustler put down his ace high. The twin threw his cards into the pile in the middle of the table. They passed the cards to the hustler. It was his deal.
The cards felt warm and friendly now. They were things you could depend on. No jealous ace could get you in trouble. Not when he was your slave and these cards had no individual personalities to worry about. They were part of a regulation deck and these 52 were slaves in the hands of the hustler. Rat-tat-tat, like a machine gun he ran the cards into their respective slots. Deal 'em, win, deal 'em, win.
Two hours had gone by and so had Sgt. Snow. He was now kibitzing over the hustler's shoulder. The hustler had lost four hands—one before Snow quit and three afterwards. It's tough for even the best to operate with five cards and a nose in every hand.
This could very easily be the last hand, the money needed only a little centralization and the hustler would have it all; but Snow must go. The hustler was dealing rat-tat-tat. He hocked up a big mouthful, turned his head away from the table and spat right in Snow's face. "Geez, I'm sorry pal," he said. "I didn't know you were sittin' there."
Snow left.
The hustler won the hand and all was over but the crying.
"Let me take fifty until next payday," said the first twin.
"Me too," said the second twin. "We were s'posed to send fifty apiece to the old lady."
"That's tough," said the hustler.
"Come on, you got plenty," said the twins. "The C.O. would hate to hear about these games. Ya know how he is about gamblin.'"
I knew those two hicks would cause trouble, cursed the hustler,
a letter to the captain from their old lady about not gettin' any money and he'd wonder why. I guess there'd be a coupla guys willin' to tell him, too. "I ain't givin' ya back no money, but I'll play ya one hand a draw for fifty against next month's pay. Deal? If you lose or if ya win you'll never play again with me, ok?"

"Yeh, yeh," chimed the twins.

"You deal," said the hustler shoving the deck to the first twin. He didn't want the cards to tempt him.

The twin dealt.

The hustler picked up aces over fours.

"How many?" said the twin.

The hustler threw away one ace, one four and a queen. "Three," he said. The twin dealt him two aces and a four. The hustler laughed to himself, geezus, I can't even lose fair he thought. For the first time in his life the hustler cheated to lose. He palmed away two of the aces and stole two different cards off the discard pile.

A fist hit him alongside the head and he went off the chair, angry feet pumped into his ribs. Voices screamed, "Ya cheatin' bastard, no wonder ya been a winnin'."

And just before everything living passed him by, a small but clearer voice whispered to him from his dark place on the floor, "never give a sucker an even break."

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miles and miles runs the glaring white expanse of highway
miles and miles with no bend or turning
miles lined with palms and mangroves which cast no shadow
from a cloudless sky a fiery sun casts its merciless searing rays
on a prison road gang sweating and tired
rejeced world's children

... Pauline Hylkema