

The Double-Skunk Break

By: Arthur Ammeter

“Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, and a pair of kings is six,” said Esker, left-handing one of his red pegs into the sixty hole on the cribbage board. Checking his wife’s score, he noticed her leading peg at the 121 mark, the last hole on the board. “That’s got to be more than luck, Tina,” he fumed, “now I’m down two double games”.

“Skill, Esk, that’s what it’s called,” Tina replied. Seated at the kitchen table, right leg crossed over her left, Tina was in a teasing mood.

Esker, boiling mad, picked up the board and the unboxed cards, yanked open the glass doors of the oak hutch and flung the board and cards inside. He stalked down the hall towards the bathroom, noticing too late the cat toy under his foot. Esker’s weight and motion drove his foot backward, out from under him. He crashed down on his left hip and left forearm, knocking his head against the wall. Pain stabbed him in the wrist. Gasping, he rolled onto his right side and sat up

“Esk, what happened? Are you OK?” Tina called in alarm.

“I think so, except I’m sure my wrist is broken,” he replied.

Half an hour later, his left forearm encased in plastic wrap and melting ice cubes, Esker sat on a lumpy chair in the emergency ward of the hospital, his face pale and drawn. Tina sat with him, a year-old issue of Time magazine getting her sporadic attention. Across from them, a baby with a very red face fussed on his mother’s lap.

“At this rate I’ll die before they get to me,” Esker complained.

“They’re doing their best,” Tina admonished. “You want an aspirin?”

“I’m too far gone for that,” Esker grumbled. Cradling his left arm in his right, he shifted his buttocks into a more comfortable position. He noticed for the first time the red-haired woman across from him. Dressed for a business office, she had an attache case across her lap and a tissue wrapped around her left thumb.

Esker and the woman sized each other up, sending across the aisle glances that fell just short of eye contact. Beside her husband, Tina gave up trying to read a cover story on sharks and flipped her magazine onto the pile at her elbow.

“Look, Tina, why don’t you go back home?” Esker suggested, sensing her restlessness. “I’m OK, really. I’ll ask someone to call you when they’re through with me. It can’t be much longer. There’s no use in both of us wasting time here, that’s sure.”

Getting to her feet, Tina tossed a malevolent glance at the redhead. “Well, alright, she sighed. “I’m not doing you much good here.”

Esker studied the woman across the aisle. Good face, great cheekbones, he thought, strong jaw line. The rest of her wasn’t bad either, he decided. His eyes having finished their sweep, he turned away, but not quickly enough. Their eyes met. Esker reddened and feigned interest in a piece of hospital machinery in the corner by the door.

“Hi,” said the woman. “I’m Paula.”

“Esker,” he said.

“Hi, Esker,” she replied, getting to her feet and sliding into the seat still warm from Tina. Esker was conscious of a faint musk, very pleasant, and the pressure of the woman’s arm against his. “What did you do to your forearm?” she asked.

“Fell”, allowed Esker. “What happened to you?”

“Paper cut”, was the reply, “ a really bad one”. Paula peeled the tissue off her thumb and offered her hand. Esker accepted the proffered hand, noting the beautifully manicured nails, and inspected the thumb. He could see no damage.

“So, Esker, what do you do?” Paula’s tone was engaging.

“Tina, my wife, and I run a small business,” he said, suddenly conscious that the stabbing pain in his wrist had subsided to a dull throbbing. “That was her that just left.”

“Do you run a franchise or are you independent?” Paula queried.

Esker, although curious as to why a woman he had just met and whom he didn’t know from Eve was questioning him about his business, gave no sign that he deemed her question impertinent. “No, no franchise,” he replied. “We’re independent entrepreneurs, you might say.”

“A dying breed,” Paula said. “Hardy souls, all of you.” In three more questions, Paula learned from an agreeable Esker that yes, he owned the business, no his wife was not a partner, and that he owed no money. Paula put her hand on Esker’s forearm and leaned towards him, lips inches from his ear and said, “I’m an investment broker representing a mining syndicate. We’re looking for potential investors in a new diamond mine in the North. Our explorations show that there’s blue clay up there, just like the blue clay in the diamond pipes in South Africa. Believe me, this cold blue clay is really hot.” Paula’s voice was soft. Esker felt her breath tickle his ear.

“What makes me so attractive?” Esker turned towards her.

“Paula chuckled. “There’s something about you, Esker. You look like a man who isn’t afraid to take risks. You are financially independent, you own your own business. You’re just the kind of man we’re looking for.”

“Very flattering,” said Esker, “tell me more, like what’s in it for me.”

“With pleasure,” Paula purred. She was very close now, her voice intimate and her gaze direct. “Financial security, for one thing. What every man dreams about. And here it is, just within your reach.”

Esker was more than ever conscious of Paula, her voice sultry, her offer tempting. He was conscious too that his arm was hurting again, that the ice in the plastic wrap was completely gone, and that water was running up the sleeve of his shirt and dripping down onto his pants. They’ll think I’ve wet myself, he thought. The baby across the aisle, face redder than ever, had begun to wail and his mother was bouncing him up and down in her lap.

“Okay,” he said, “I’m game. You realize I’m not in a position to sign cheques, however.”

“Oh, that’s no problem, “ replied Paula brightly. “Your credit card will do just fine. We’ll hold it for security and iron out the details later.”

With his good hand, Esker fumbled in his back pocket and yanked out his wallet. “Sure, I can give you that.” Flipping it open, Esker imagined Tina in a fur coat slipping into a Mercedes, a large rock on her finger.

Paula smiled and snapped open her attache case. “Let me get a slip out,“ she said.

“Esker Block to X-ray, please, Esker Block,“ boomed the public-address system. Startled, Esker sat up straight.

“Thank God,“ he muttered, “I was beginning to think they had forgotten all about me”. He got up, snapped his wallet shut, tucked it into his back pocket, and bolted down the hall.

“Esker, wait, this is an offer...,” Paula’s voice trailed off. Esker was gone.

Entering the kitchen on a morning a week after his visit to the hospital, Esker heard the coffee maker heave its final gurgle. Resting his plaster-encased wrist against the cupboard door, Esker reached down his favourite coffee mug and filled it with the fragrant black liquid from the pot. Sucking up a mouthful, he grunted with satisfaction. He reached for a slice of toast.

“Esk, you’re slurping”, Tina corrected without looking up from her paper. “Did you see the paper this morning, dear?” she questioned as she folded back the third page and held it up. “The woman in the photo here, she’s the one from the hospital--the redhead in the waiting room.”

“Lemme see,” Esker demanded, his face suddenly hot. “Why is she in the paper?”

“It says here she has been arrested on fraud charges,” Tina explained. “Apparently she’s alleged to have represented some fake mining company. She looks the criminal type, doesn’t she?”

Esker crunched down on his toast. “Look, Tina,” he said, “after breakfast, why don’t we play some cribbage? I’ve got to start working off those four games I owe you.”

“Esker, honey,” said Tina, “please don’t talk with your mouth full.”