

## The Great Zucchini

California farmer and amateur magician Paul Ciccilini beamed with pride as he watched the judge place a third-place ribbon on his entry, a perfectly grown zucchini. Hardly anyone else noticed the ten-inch green wonder; but this was an accomplishment worth celebrating. Paul took the vegetable and ribbon, along with a \$100 cash prize, out into the hot Las Vegas sun.

“I should do something crazy with the money. No one back home would have expected me to win and I still have the ribbon to prove it.”

So, Paul decided to bet the money at a casino, have a little fun to mark the occasion. He walked up to the cashier cage and traded his cash for twenty, five-dollar chips, colorful little pieces of plastic that he carried with deliberate speed to one of the black jack tables.

Paul sat down around the semicircular table between three other players. An old man, a college coed, and a woman in her forties.

“Place your bet son. It’s five dollars minimum.”

Paul placed one of his chips in front of him. The dealer distributed the cards. Paul glanced at his hand, a king and a jack. The dealer had a queen showing and another card face down. One by one, he queried the players.

The coed said “hit me” and drew a seven, giving her a total of twenty to go with her face card and three. “Hold”.

The old man said “I’m good” and smiled with his two face cards, also totaling twenty.

The woman said “hit me” but busted with another face card; she had started with thirteen. “Damn”.

Paul said “stay” and felt good about his hand.

The dealer turned over his cards, a nine and a seven. Sixteen, the dealer had to draw another card. Another nine, busted and Paul won. He thought that he would lose all his chips in a few minutes but this was a surprise.

The larger surprise was that Paul kept on winning. When he had accumulated a few thousand dollars’ worth of chips, one of the floor security men approached him to see if Paul was counting cards.

“Doing very well, sir. Would you like a drink on the house?” Casinos liked it when players drank; it disrupted their concentration.

“Oh, no thank you. Well, maybe a diet cola.” A pretty waitress overheard them and placed a non-alcoholic soda next to Paul, giving him a smile.

“Thanks.” Paul went back to playing. The security man walked out of his vision, but he signaled to the corner ceiling where others watched the players with video cameras. In a soft voice, he said “keep an eye on this one”. And they did, as Paul continued to win. As Paul’s winnings climbed to ten thousand dollars, the dealer announced that his table was closed.

“What do I do now?”

“You can move your winnings to another table sir. I’ll get a security person to help you.” They moved Paul to a higher stakes table upstairs. One hundred dollars a bet. His five-dollar chips had been exchanged for one hundred-dollar chips, but Paul had over a hundred of these now.

Paul noticed that the players here looked more serious. Like real gamblers. He sat down among them with his winnings and placed a one-hundred-dollar chip in front of him. They ignored Paul.

Paul continued to win, but the money accelerated that much faster because of the chip values. Before long he had close to fifty thousand dollars in front of him and a new friend. A sexy woman, in her twenties, had sidled up to him and began giving him a light massage.

“Hey lover. My name is Desiree. What’s yours?”

Paul looked over this woman, about his age but way out of his league. “Paul. Nice to meet you.”

“You’re doing very well Paul. Think you might like to take a break and relax?”

Paul had seen enough movies to know that this attention was from a professional, a fixture in the casino. But when would he have another chance to bed anyone as fine as her. He whispered to her.

“Where?”

“Oh, I have a room here. With champagne on ice.” Just then, Desiree noticed a bulge in Paul’s pants and whispered back. “My, you seem to have a stiffy. Do you like me?”

Paul realized that she was referring to the zucchini which Paul had stuffed down his left front pocket. He pulled it out. “I do dear, but this is just a vegetable I won at the farmer competition earlier.”

“You won a vegetable?”, she said.

“No, I mean my vegetable won an award.” He showed her the ribbon. “See.”

“Oh, all right.” Desiree pretended this was normal.

Security exchanged his chips for cash, fifty-one thousand dollars in neat one hundred-dollar bills. Paul and Desiree walked hand in hand to the elevator. Paul figured he was in for the best time in his life but she might also steal all his money when they were done.

Desiree's room was clean and romantic, with dozens of flowers, and bowls of fruit.

"Why don't you open a bottle of champagne Paul, while I freshen up."

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled as she headed to the bathroom. Paul opened the bottle and poured out two glasses. When she returned, Paul was confronted with a woman who had earned her name. She wore a red chemise with matching panties and her long, dark hair was positioned over her breasts. Her beautiful bare feet were skillfully polished in red as well. Paul was still dressed.

"Paul, let's make you a little more comfortable." She undressed him down to his boxer briefs.

They clinked their glasses and drank. Then she sat on his lap and fed him strawberries while massaging his neck and back. "I love fruit and champagne, don't you lover?"

Paul could only muster a smile and nod. He was totally under her spell. But what next? Was he supposed to ask her how much or just put some cash in her direction. He didn't want to ruin the best night of his life with an amateur move now.

But Desiree noticed his contemplation, realizing he was new at this. She took a remote and put on some music, smooth jazz, at just the right volume. Then she turned the lights off and lit a few candles.

"Would you like to join me in bed, lover?" Paul forgot all about his dilemma.

They made love for an hour, only pausing to drink and eat the berries.

"Let's rest a bit and start again." She cuddled her body on to his and closed her eyes. Paul did the same. An hour later, he awoke to find her on top of him, continuing the passion. When they had finished, his reservations returned.

But he didn't want to sound like some hick farmer who just fell off the zucchini truck.

"Guess we should call it a night. You're really great." He already realized he had said too much.

"But Paul, there's a late Cirque show next door. We have time to catch dinner and see it. What do you think?"

An actual date with this beauty was more than he expected.

"Yes, I'd like that." They got dressed and had dinner next to the show entrance. She never mentioned money for her services and they went to see the Cirque show, a romantic date night venue.

When the show was over, Paul walked her back to her room. Still confused about what to do next, he confessed.

"Desiree, this has been the best time of my life. You are the best lover I've ever been with, by far. But I don't know..."

She interrupted him. "What this should cost?"

"Yes."

"Whatever you think is fair lover." Paul took out his packet of hundreds and peeled off five thousand dollars. He handed it to her and gave her a quizzical look. "All right?"

She smiled and took his hand. "Why don't you stay here tonight?"

Apparently, he made a good estimate of her worth and was in for more of her favors.

In the morning, Desiree told Paul she was going out for a run and to take his time. "I ordered breakfast for you lover. Hope to see you again sometime."

Not wanting to overstay his welcome, Paul got dressed and left. He noticed that she didn't take any more of his

money, but the zucchini was gone. Well, he still had the ribbon and if the vegetable pleased her, it was well worth it.

He decided to try his luck in the casino one more time before he went home. Exchanging some money for chips, he sat down at the hundred-dollar black jack table. But something was wrong. He began to lose and before long had exhausted most of the money he had left. It had been an adventure and he had already decided that the money was found anyway.

As he left the casino, he saw Desiree at another table, with a large collection of chips in front of her. She didn't see him, but he noticed something next to her drink.

The great zucchini!