

We are...

not {!!!} ... }

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HAPPY

By Salvatore {!!!} Difalco

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... There is always some lurking danger behind Sal Difalco's language, and, "We Are Not Happy," is gratefully no different.*

Sammy is in a poker game – that is really all you need to know about the plot. He watches his cohorts as he bets into them, loses to them, stays out with them. When I read this story I'm reminded of those great moments in cinematic history: Tony Soprano hosting a game with Frank Sinatra Jr.; Joe Pesci going aggro on the future Tony Soprano's nephew; Edward Norton and Matt Damon getting the shit kicked out of them for playing dirty with cops; Paul Newman and Robert Redford putting the long con on Robert Shaw; Paul Newman sittin' there with nothing but a "cool hand." Yet, at best, the most I could tell you about these characters are that they are simply guys playing poker.

This is a story about men playing poker and it would be dumb of me to suggest you do anything but read it.

Difalco tiptoes through what would otherwise be an ordinary game of tired men, playing tired games, with odd names and the implicit agreement that ponytailed men should stop being ponytailed men, "We tell lies to ourselves so that we can get along with people we would otherwise decapitate, given license." He lets you know that the poker

game is only the vehicle through which the point is made, “If language is the house of being, his needed a wrecking ball. ‘That’s what leads me to believe your story may be just a story. And there’s nothing wrong with that. We’re all here to tell stories. But the question remains—and it’s unavoidable—why the fuck would the aliens choose you?’”

He has created a platform for the discussion of existentialism on flat felt. Whether you want to read these men with a dangerous background, dead end jobs, 70000 kids, it doesn’t matter, the space in which they play the game allows the speaker to think.

“The mind is headcheese.”

Quite true.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language...*)

The followers folded in turn and then Tiribasi said he existed to engage. Even swollen with inferiority, I decided the odds kept me within reach of an upset.

Cohen across the table, head on the felt, had fallen asleep. He also enjoyed baldness. But his face, in the throes of slumber, resembled a cushion creased by the buttocks of an obese man or woman whom he had asked or paid to sit on it.

Even if there is no God and everything is permitted, not everything is permitted.

WE ARE NOT HAPPY

Tiribasi yapped my ear off, while he peeled a banana. Told me about the Caribbean cruise he went on with his wife Mufalda. He’d gained twenty pounds on the two-week trip. The food was outrageous. He ate steak and lobster twice a day. Midnight lamb chops. Desserts made by a pastry chef from Paris. He kept talking as he ate the banana, right in my ear, the squish-squash of his chewing inducing vertigo and nausea in the smoke-thick confines of Lee Tong’s illicit east end poker club. He only got seasick once, Tiribasi explained, and just for a few hours. Then he hit the dinner buffet. He made it

work. After all, in the truest sense, he was an artist of life. Last time he went on a cruise he spent an entire week in the cabin, avocado-coloured. His wife thought it hilarious.

“Tiribasi, you’re up.”

He inspected his hand as though regarding an ancient text. “Call,” he said.

I called as well, even though I held two lumps of horse feces.

Cass, the clever poacher, followed eagerly, and after him Ammo the ex-cop decided a little mustard would tease out the red in our cheeks and dissuade the pretenders. Fu-Manchu and mirror shades, Ammo played the bully with finesse. He relished the role. But his tactics angered me. His leaning towers of chips angered me. My own weak stacks angered me. I wanted to cripple him, but I lacked resources. The followers folded in turn and then Tiribasi said he existed to engage. Even swollen with inferiority, I decided the odds kept me within reach of an upset. Without hope there is no reason to move forward. Sicilians say where there is hope there is death. Perhaps they have something there. Cass also wanted to feel alive for a few minutes. Understandable. His spirit seethed with ennui.

My neck felt like an enormous lion was gnawing it. Stress accounted for that. Stress takes a terrible toll on a body. Can we live well, given manifold impediments? I found Tiribasi—always wearing a smug little smile reeking of superiority—stressful. His banana peel reeking at my elbow stressed me out. His unkempt ponytail also stressed me out. Ponytails should be illegal on a man his age—and I’m only a few years younger. I had lost most of my hair in my 20s. Good thing baldness became cool. When I was growing up there were only two irreproachable bald men in the world, Yul Brynner and Telly Savalas. Now we are many and proud.

“Tiribasi, you’re up. If I have to keep saying your name, I’m gonna lose my shit.”

“Hold your horses. Can’t a man think?”

“Think all you want, on your own friggin time.”

A swirl of isolator vapor tickled my nose. It reminded me of a freshly mown lawn spritzed with clove oil and perhaps a hit of cat piss. Ammo held the vaporizer near his chin with a trembling white hand. His eyes rolled back in his head. After a moment, he flung himself forward in his chair and tossed the vaporizer across the green felt.

“Sammy boy, you look moosh as fuck. Haul on that.”

“I’m not feeling the best,” I said, truthful.

“This will help.”

Cohen across the table, head on the felt, had fallen asleep. He also enjoyed baldness. But his face, in the throes of slumber, resembled a cushion creased by the buttocks of an obese man or woman whom he had asked or paid to sit on it.

“Someone wake him.”

“Let him sleep. He looks so peaceful.”

“Action,” Tiribasi said.

“All you can eat!” I responded.

The others looked at me with circumspection, not fear. No one feared me anymore, not since all the teeth on the left side of my jaw had been removed due to an infection. Unable to afford partial dentures, I admittedly looked strange. Most found the asymmetry unnerving. My status diminished after the extractions. I seldom spoke now because no one listened to me or were so repulsed by my appearance they could not bear to look at me particularly when I was speaking. Even if there is no God and everything is permitted, not everything is permitted. Nevertheless I served as a friendly ear for

tribulations and summaries of events and situations of which I held zero interest. This had become my new role, but I was unprepared for it.

“No callers? Ship it.”

“You’re full of shit,” Tiribasi said, adjusting the elastic of his ponytail.

“There are remedies for that,” Cass said.

“Did anyone ever tell you your breath smells?” Max said.

Tiribasi reared his head and opened his mouth, drawing a clawed hand to it. He looked offended. But he only *looked* offended. He was like Sartre’s would be thespian waiter, going through the motions, thus operating in bad faith. This is the plight of the dishonest existentialist. There is always a place to pay. Had he been truly offended he would have defended himself with the wisdom and bite of the putrefying old. Instead, he breathed into his rotting hand and made a face like an unmasked company man cleaning the boss’s overflowing septic tank.

Sitting to Cohen’s right, bearded and ursine, Max heavily leaned into his shoulder. Silly Cohen had been puffing black Romeo all evening from a little clay pipe, old school with the red-wrapper, but it reeked of petroleum. I suspect the narcotic effects of smoking petroleum products have never been fully documented.

I hauled on the vaporizer, immediately hacking. My lungs resisted the hot fumes. I hacked and hacked. I saw stars, an actual phenomenon. The insensitive Tiribasi asked me if was I going to continue? Today? Cass said he’d fetch water. Ammo sat there smiling, a mangy Cheshire cat, fading in and out of my consciousness as the isolator took hold of my head and squeezed into a tiny dimpled ball.

I felt my mind retreating from my frontal lobe. That is to say, it sat back on its

haunches and took in the hazy room. A flat screen flickering behind Cohen and Max featured mixed martial artists fighting. I watched a man knee another man in the face with an exquisite spray of snot and blood—even wilder in slow-mo. Surprising he didn’t kill him. Almost killed me to watch. Fighting repulsed me, and yet I liked it.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Tiribasi said. “Have you? Have you seen a ghost, Sammy? Because I see ghosts all the time.”

“What do you mean you see ghosts all the time?” I said, dipping my head and lifting my eyes. “What does that mean, Tiribasi?”

“I mean, like the other day I saw my dead Uncle Phil standing by my bedroom door. He was wearing one of those old-fashioned nightdresses. He looked pretty good, you know. A little pale, but he didn’t appear to be in any pain.”

“Did he say anything to you?” I asked.

“No, he didn’t say anything,” Tiribasi said.

“Were you scared?” Max asked.

“Not really. Like I said, I’ve been seeing ghosts, so it wasn’t the first time.”

“Tiribasi’s one of those,” Max said with a wag of his eyebrows. “But, let me tell you—other day I saw a cigar-shaped UFO in the sky, I swear to God.”

“Where’d you see this thing?” I asked.

“In my neighbourhood. Think it followed me home.”

“Why would it follow *you* home, Max?” I paused to give him a moment to reflect on the nonsense he had just spewed. If language is the house of being, his needed a wrecking ball. “That’s what leads me to believe your story may be just a story. And

there's nothing wrong with that. We're all here to tell stories. But the question remains—and it's unavoidable—why the fuck would the aliens choose *you*?"

"I'm an exceptional human being," Max said without irony. "A prime example of the male of our species."

"You would be a reason to annihilate us."

"Someone do something!" Tiribasi shouted, having heard enough.

"Yeah, what the hell is this, a therapy session?" Cohen said, sitting up blinking and wiping his eyes.

People beheld their holdings. I handled horse droppings again. All night like that. And some nights are like that in the poker universe. You find yourself thinking, when are my cowboys coming, or my pretty ladies? I would have been over the moon with a couple of hockey sticks. Yeah, I can talk the talk. I drank the water Cass brought and it tasted like rust. I looked at it. Could have passed for iodine.

"What is this?" I asked, holding up the glass like an amber lamp.

Cass apologized with a bow and made excuses like I cared about his excuses. He darted off to the kitchen for another try at it. Let the water run, I thought, but said nothing. Sometimes it takes more than one go to get things right. Tiribasi leaned to me and whispered something with banana breath I did not understand.

"Repeat that," I said.

"I can't," he said, tapping his head. "Haha, I forgot what I just told you. Craziest damn thing."

"The isolator impairs short-term memory," I said.

"Yeah, I heard that," Cass intoned.

Tiribasi's mouth opened harshly. "Deal, for fuck sake. What's he doing? Get off your phone, Max."

"It's my mother."

"It's his mother!"

The isolator began to properly scramble my consciousness. Bizarre but ephemeral thoughts dashed through the hallways of my mind palace like shadowy machine elves. Laughter burbled like a rubbery saxophone septet confronted with lemon-suckers. Someone slapped several mules. The resulting brays added to the eruption. All men are not created equal, but all men have mothers. All men are sons of mothers. I looked at my holdings. Two radiant black bullets make even the saddest sack pull up his pants and tighten his rope belt. Feeling foxy and insane, I slow-played my aces, glancing at Tiribasi's ponytail and wishing to lop it off. A pair of bright scissors would have sheered it cleanly. Then I ventured into my mind palace and played out a scenario where I chop off Tiribasi's head with one of those murderous medieval axes.

The head is placed in a large dish to be transported to a man of some means or position demanding to see it immediately. No indication of shock on the face of the young woman thus tasked. She wears a plain blue tunic and has wrinkled eyes and a gentle face. She looks like she is about to say something — to whom, it isn't clear. Indeed, she resembles my high school sweetheart Janet Tutolo who became a skillful hairdresser. She moves across the parquet floor with the dish raised before her.

The man who waits to see Tiribasi's head sits on a couch of crimson velvet, wearing ermine-lined robes. He boasts an extravagant head of curly black locks that

glisten and tumble down to his shoulders. His tiny silk-stockinged feet curl when he sees the woman walk into the room.

“Come come,” he says, clapping sharply twice. “I want to see the look on his face. Horrified or surprised?”

“I think he looks horrified,” the woman says.

“Quickly, I want to see for myself.”

She brings over the plate with Tiribasi’s head and holds it out to the man. The annoying gray ponytail flops over the edge of the plate. The face itself looks neither horrified nor surprised. Indeed it looks peaceful.

“What is this?” cries the man, waving about his jewel-encrusted hands. “Was he given an elixir before the axe?”

The woman’s mouth corners drop. “I don’t know, but I would guess not. The scream was rather authentic.”

“He screamed?”

“Well, he screamed when he saw the axe.”

They both dispassionately study Tiribasi’s severed head on the plate. Does closer scrutiny of his face reveal an almost imperceptible smile? Perhaps it does. The woman’s arms tremble.

“Why did you say the face looked horrified?” the man asks.

The woman lowers the plate to her waist. “Isn’t that what you wanted to hear? That it looked horrified? It would have spoiled the surprise had I told you the truth.”

Someone was talking to me. “Sammy, you’re not going white, are you? Fellas Sammy’s going white.”

“I’m not going white,” I said with lidded eyes, weak-limbed.

“Who’s up?” Tiribasi barked. “Yo!”

I gazed at his head for a moment. Intact. I smiled. Where would I have found a medieval axe in any case? And the act would not have been prompted by hatred or a love of violence, but rather, to memorialize him. We tell lies to ourselves so that we can get along with people we would otherwise decapitate, given license. This is one of the small truths you learn when you have lived through wars and plagues and depressions and divorces and deaths and births and baptisms and funerals.

Cohen twiddled his fingers fatuously and inspected his cards. He studied them for an interminable length of time before entering the fray with handful of chips. His upper lip twitched, indicating—by my reckoning—superior holdings. So far so good, I thought, on the tell side of things. When you possess innate poker skills, you sniff out these tells in the live variation of the game. Sometimes the neck veins bulge. Sometimes the panting begins, flushed cheeks, shaking knees, sweaty palms. You would run away from this man in a plaza, were he to approach you.

Impossible things happen when you least expect them. The world, aye, the universe, is a carnival of marvelous and violent collisions. For now, as I glanced at the crooked flop, another bullet sat there, red, already bloodied. It fit in nicely with the plan to take my colleagues by complete ambush, to be pythonic in my embrace of their egos and wish fulfillment, to crush them without pity. The dangers of red never slipped my attention. Red of the wrong suit could destroy my aspirations. Two hearts and two hearts

left the draw to the gods for a fifth and a flush to bloody my citadel.

Pale Ammo, on a heart draw, played coy, even after I hammered him. The others fled like thieves stealing tomatoes from somebody's garden. We had all been there once, roaming through the vegetable gardens of our innocence. Then we grew hair on our privates and saw the world as a pair of thighs and breasts to be ogled and surmounted. How ugly we became. And now, degenerate, effete, we caterwauled to each other about our respective misfortunes and the fallen arches of our abject and self-imposed failings. Tiribasi said something banana-scented in my ear again, and had my ear possessed razor sharp teeth it would have bitten off his nose and spat it back at him.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking." I shut my eyes and tried to organize my thoughts. The ongoing chatter did not help matters.

"Keep thinking, it won't change the way things go."

"No force can keep the inevitable from happening."

"They say that brain function and consciousness are tied to universal energies."

"Duh, like they discovered America or something."

"No kidding. That's more of that fake science they peddle to the masses to keep them from thinking for themselves."

We all understood the parameters of our limitations, even if we were too embarrassed to admit them. But sometimes willing a thing to happen and achieving a favourable conclusion reinforces the false presumption that the power of mind is all that. But nothing is further from the truth. The mind is headcheese.

"Call," Ammo intoned like an anemic monk in a monastery summoning the choir.

"Ammo calls."

We are subject to the laws of entropy. Disorder is natural. Disorder will prevail. In time, the universe will stretch out and cool off. Everything will come to a grinding halt, even time itself. But at that moment, at that table with these men, and despite the fruitless vapor-embellished fluttering of my thoughts, the irony of the world kept me rooted to its reality. When the heart arrived, as feared, or as desired, it came with a heavy thud. All eyes documented the savagery. All eyes—brows superficially arched with pity or concern—cloaked their true emotion: schadenfreude.

Yes, we are not happy! Yes we are not happy! cried the little voices in my head. And tears that came to my eyes were lost in the haze of vaporizers.

“Deal the river.”

“Deal the river, man, it’s getting late.”

There was hope on the river?

Hope perhaps defines and shapes the human journey. Without it we are merely lumps of flesh. But there was no hope on the river, a moment later, when nothing paired. Nothing paired and I felt the life force draining from the top of my head, not from the feet as one would think. It is a light energy, this force. It rises into the ether like hot air tinted slightly blue or pink.

We live to win, whether we believe that or not. Winning doesn’t obviate all suffering, but losing confirms our greatest fears: that we are losers. That we cannot win. Take it with a smile, good sport that you are, but the eyes reveal leftover embers of hope, ever darkening.

“Running bad no fun,” Tiribasi said, chucking peanuts into his mouth.

At that moment I envisaged his head on the plate, peaceful, but silenced and still and it calmed me and allowed me to view him with tolerance if not good humour.

Ammo, like a snake who just swallowed the tail of the rodent he earlier asphyxiated, licked his lips and half-shut his eyes, settling into a digestive somnus. Yes, life can make you feel like that, and when it does you have no one to thank but the stars, and the random jitters of quanta driving this hologram.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *A sundry group of friends and I played a weekly low-stakes Texas Hold Em poker game for some twenty years. The game was a total gas and I loved everything about it—the chatter, the ballbreaking, the high-grade cannabis, and the game of Texas Hold Em itself. Of course Covid brought an abrupt end to that, and though we tried playing in an online format, it was a weak and boring replacement for the live game. Yet, despite double-vaxxing and ongoing normalization all around us, for various reasons we have not resumed playing. I hope we soon do, as it was a source of great camaraderie, comedy, and occasional nail biting. The game itself—Texas Hold Em—has lost some of its former luster. During the early 2000s it somehow caught on as a spectator sport (creating a pantheon of telegenic and not-so telegenic superstars) and gained widespread popularity among the masses. Needless to say, my friends and I were part of that wave. For a brief time, you could find some manifestation of Texas Hold Em on television almost twenty-four hours a day, to the point of supersaturation if not absurdity. No longer: it's almost never televised these days. The world has moved on, I guess. Still, I hope that eventually the fellows and I can sit down at a table again, hold some cards, break each others balls and play the game we love (or used to love). My story “We Are Not Happy” pays homage to that once dependable and enjoyable mainstay of my life and the cast of strange and stony characters who made it so.*

AUTHOR BIO: Sal Difalco lives in Toronto at the moment. He is the author of the story collections, *Black Rabbit* (Anvil Press) and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press).

