

The Hemlock

A Literary Arts Journal

WINTER ISSUE | DECEMBER 2024



POETRY | FICTION | FLASH FICTION
NON-FICTION | VISUAL ARTS | BOOK REVIEWS

www.thehemlockjournal.org

False Millennium

By Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

My whole life has conspired to bring me to this place, and I can't despise my whole life.

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, *Millennium Approaches*

Late on the evening of December 30, 1999, Trent received a call from his attorney. The clerk of the district court had advised that Trent's criminal trial was to begin in early January. "Once the trial starts, you may be in custody for the duration of the trial, and if convicted, you will be taken to jail immediately" warned the lawyer.

Trent panicked at the news and decided to get out of town at first light. He was not sure where he would go, but he must leave California without delay. He packed hurriedly, jumped in his leased BMW, and headed northeast on I-15, hoping to make it to the Nevada line by noon and to Las Vegas shortly thereafter.

As he drove past Barstow and into the Mojave Desert, the desolate views along the road made him focus on his desperate situation. He had been indicted on several counts

of securities fraud, thanks to his former partners' chicanery. He was just the fall guy. He was a crook himself, for sure, but many others had gotten away with doing worse things. He was just unlucky.

By the time he reached Henderson, his black mood had crystalized into a decision: he would go to Vegas to die.

He had no hotel reservations and was hoping that he would find someplace to spend his final hours. Media stories related that there was a high risk of a terrorist attack to coincide with the turning of the year 2000, and there was a risk of a massive digital collapse due to Y2K issues. It was said that the fears generated by those stories were keeping people from places like New York and Las Vegas, leaving hotels under-occupied and

desperate to fill empty rooms. If that was true, he might be able to die in luxury, perhaps at the Bellagio or Caesar's Palace. If not, he would find some hole to hide.

Upon arrival in Vegas in the early afternoon of Friday, December 31, 1999, Trent drove to the Strip and started his search for a place to make his last stand. He went north to south and back to every major casino, from the Circus Circus to the Mandalay Bay, from the Tropicana to the Sahara. He discovered that most hotels were almost sold out, and the few available rooms could only be had for several hundred dollars, which he did not have.

After hours of searching, Trent found a cheap motel at the north edge of town four blocks from the Strip, where he was able to book the last available single room for all the cash he carried, except for a twenty-dollar bill. The room was hardly luxurious, but at this point his dream of making a classy exit had been blown away by reality.

He was scheduling his suicide for midnight to coincide with the new millennium, so Trent decided to while a few hours away by gambling. He went to Bally's, got ten dollars' worth of nickels, and began

playing one of the five-cent slots. He played mechanically, nickel after nickel, as his coins were swallowed by the machine. He promptly lost it all and, after some hesitation, got five more dollars' worth of nickels and began feeding them to the beast. He was down to the last three coins when he hit the jackpot and found himself in possession of an avalanche of nickels amounting to one hundred and eighty-five dollars. "Good. Now I will be able to afford a fine last meal."

In his earlier search, he had discovered that the Flamingo Hotel served a decent buffet at the Paradise Garden along the flamingo pond and, if he sat by the windows, he could watch the hummingbirds, ducks and flamingoes, and the koi fish at the pond. Moreover, wine was included in the price. He arrived at the Flamingo at a quarter to five, ready to make the line for the earliest sitting at five. He was starving.

He had a leisurely dinner and drank a lot of wine. By six thirty he staggered out of the Flamingo and decided to walk south on the Strip to clear his head.

He was scheduling his suicide for midnight to coincide with the end of the twentieth century and there were a few hours left before the event, so Brent felt like whiling some time away by watching sports, a favorite pastime when he wanted to get his mind away from his troubles. He walked south on the Strip in search of a place where he could catch some game and ended up at the Race and Sports Book at the Mandalay Bay. It was a huge amphitheater with 17 large TVs as well as individual booths and, in the back of the room, comfortable black leather couches from which you could watch in privacy the action of any ongoing sports event. He sat on one of the couches and ordered a beer.

A few minutes later, he was joined on the couch by a heavy-set middle-aged man holding a large glass of Scotch. He sat, nodded at Trent, and focused intently on one of the screens, which was showing the Sun Bowl game between Oregon and Minnesota. Trent did not care much for football and even less for the Sun Bowl participants, but his attention was drawn by a loud series of groans from the guy as he followed the progress of the game, which was in the third quarter with the teams closely matched. After a while, Trent could not contain his

curiosity and turned to his couchmate and asked: "Do you have money on that game?" The reply surprised him: "No, I don't, but I like watching games to practice my skill in predicting the final score. It looks like Oregon is going to win this one."

Trying to suppress a smirk, Trent replied: "Are you really able to predict in the third quarter how a game is going to end?" The man turned towards him, slurring his words drunkenly: "Not only that, but I can even figure out the point spread. Oregon by three or four."

"Really! You must be doing well then."

The guy hiccupped and retorted in a loud alcoholic voice that attempted to be a confidential whisper. "Yes. In the last ten days, I've made a killing. By the way, I'm Greg."

Trent thought that Greg was a delusional braggart and decided to put him to the test. "How so?" he asked, feigning interest. Greg responded in as loud a whisper as before. "On December 22 there was the Mobile Alabama Bowl game between TCU and East Carolina. I

figured out that TCU would win by two touchdowns and the point spread was Carolina plus 10, meaning that TCU was favored to win by at least ten points. I picked TCU and bet \$110,000 at each of the nine casinos. I won a total of \$900,000. Not bad for a day's worth."

"Did anyone suspect you were onto something on account of the large bets?"

"Yeah, some casinos won't let me bet such a large amount on a single game. Also, the Security teams at all the casinos work together to investigate if there is something suspicious going on. So, I did not cash my tickets all at once, but one every day. Tonight's my last collection, here at the Mandalay. I leave Vegas after that to return to LA."

"Have a good trip" replied Trent dismissively, returning to his beer.

A few minutes later, loud grunts came again from his couch companion. Turning to him, Brent noticed that the man had turned very pale, was sweating, and appeared to be experiencing shortness of breath.

Brent knelt by Greg and asked,

"Are you okay?" "No" was the response, "I'm having pains in the chest and the arms."

Greg continued in a labored voice: "Heart attack. It's the third in the last two years. I may not make it this time."

"But..." started Brent. Greg cut him off: "Listen, get me help, quick. In my jacket, there's a ticket from this casino for the TCU game. It's worth \$110,000. Cash it and bring the money to the hospital and we'll split it. If don't make it, the money is yours."

Grasping the ticket, Brent started towards the counter at the room's entrance to summon help but then stopped dead in his tracks. Maybe if he waited just a bit, there might be no need for help. Nature would take its course and the TCU game money would be all his. He went to the restroom and lingered for a while before returning to the counter.

When he returned to Greg's side, the man was still alive but was drifting in and out of consciousness. As they waited for the ambulance that was taking so long to arrive, Greg turned to Brent and whispered, as if to himself: "Watch, but don't

gamble on sports. That's only for experts. If you ever gamble, play blackjack. It gives the player the best odds."

Brent sat by the reclining man, uttering false words of comfort, until two paramedics arrived pushing a stretcher. One of them bent over Greg and took his pulse. Frowning, he turned to the other: "I think he is dead." Brent watched as they tried to resuscitate Greg, without success. Finally, one of the paramedics turned to Brent: "Do you know this man?"

"Never saw him before tonight" declared Brent, misleadingly. The paramedic searched Greg's pockets and found a wallet with cash, credit cards, and a California driver's license that identified him as one Gregory Tomlison of Santa Monica. "I guess we'll turn this over to the police and they can contact the family."

Trent sprinted away from the death scene and went to the cashier's cage, where he presented the ticket with the Mobile Alabama Bowl game bet. The cashier looked at her screen, then at the ticket and frowned. "That's a lot of money," she said dubiously. "I'll need to get this from the safe. How do you want it?"

Up until that moment, Trent had given no thought to the bulk that one hundred grand in bills would make. "Hundred-dollar bills, please." "I'll get a satchel" she replied. A long while later she returned with a cheap briefcase that could barely stay closed due to its bulging contents. "There you have it," she announced. "Eleven hundred hundred-dollar bills. It'll take a bit to count them."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you counted them already. Keep one bill as my tip." He wanted to get out of there fast.

"Thanks," said the cashier, opening the briefcase and taking out one crisp bill. As she was doing so, he had an idea. "Say, where's the best blackjack game in town?"

Without batting an eyelash, she rattled: "Word has it that the Treasure Island is the best Strip casino for blackjack. They have \$10 games with great rules. If you're betting \$50 or more you can move to the high-limit salon, where there is a shoe game with double down after splitting, re-split aces, and surrender. The high-limit double deck starts at \$50 and allows double down

after splitting. The dealer stands on all 17's." He did not understand much of what she said but smiled, thanked her, walked out of the Mandalay and headed north towards his motel, hoping to avoid drawing attention to his overstuffed briefcase.

It was well past seven and the Strip was buzzing with partygoers milling around, pressed against each other so tight that Trent's feet sometimes failed to touch the ground. Everyone was moving in one direction or another headed towards something in anticipation of the big moment soon to come. It took Trent almost half an hour to negotiate the few blocks up to the Fashion Show Mall, halfway to his destination. He found himself next to the Treasure Island casino, a pink monstrosity in the shape of an open book located next to the Fashion Show Mall and the Sands Expo Center. He could see the campanile of the Venetian not far away.

Outside, it was too warm and humid for that late in December. It was well past seven and the Strip was buzzing with partygoers milling around, pressed against each other so tight that Trent's feet sometimes didn't touch the ground. Everyone was moving in one direction or another, headed towards something

in anticipation of the big moment soon to come. It took Trent almost half an hour to negotiate the few blocks up to the Fashion Show Mall, halfway to his destination. He found himself next to the Treasure Island casino, a pink monstrosity in the shape of an open book located next to the Fashion Show Mall and the Sands Expo Center. He could see the campanile of the Venetian Palazzo not far away.

During the arduous walk, his plans had changed. He was going to live. He would take off from Vegas the following morning and head for Mexico, ready to start a new life in some out of the way village with the money that had landed in his hands. But then he realized that one hundred grand would not be enough for a life on the lam and remembered Greg's dying words and the cashier's recommendation. He turned towards the Treasure Island complex. He would play a few games and try to increase his capital. Based on his experience at Bally's, he knew he was on a hot streak.

Entering the hotel, he asked for directions to the High Limit

Lounge. This turned out to be a relatively small but nicely appointed modern room with a private bar. There were four blackjack tables, three baccarat tables, and a large roulette. He stood behind one of the semi-circular blackjack tables, which was covered with a felt cloth and had room for six swivel chairs. Four of the chairs were occupied by players. A dealer, an Asian woman, was busy dealing the cards from two packs, collecting losing player bets, paying off winning bets, and keeping the game moving.

The players used chips of various colors to make their bets. Once a round was over, some players (usually the ones with losing hands) would produce bills which they placed on the table in front of the dealer and ask the dealer for chips. The dealer would convert the cash into chips and slide the chips toward the player. There were three kinds of chips: black ones worth \$100, purple ones worth \$500, and orange ones (called "pumpkins") worth \$1,000. There was a circle in front of each player in which the wagers were placed, known as the betting box. A cardboard placard at the center of the table indicated that the minimum wage was \$100 and the maximum was \$20,000.

Prior to the dealing of the cards, all players made their bets by placing chips in their respective betting boxes. Most of the players bet one black or purple chip, but one of them – a foreign-looking older man with a white mane – consistently placed one or two pumpkins.

The dealer dealt each player two cards, face up. She dealt herself one card face up and another face down. She repeated the process for the other players. After a player looked at his initial two cards and saw the value of one of the dealer's two cards, the player had to make a decision. He could ask for a hit, that is, to be dealt another card; he could stand, meaning he was satisfied with the total of the hand and wanted to stand with the cards he had; he could surrender, forfeiting the hand with an automatic loss of half his original bet; or, after being dealt the first two cards, he could double his initial bet in return for receiving one more card. Also, if a player was dealt two identical cards he could split them, making another bet equal to the original bet, and playing each card as a separate hand and drawing as many cards as he desired to each.

The mechanics of playing were simple. All cards counted their face value. Picture cards counted as 10 and the ace could count as either 1 or 11. The total of any hand was the sum of the card values in the hand. A hand containing a 4-6-8 totaled 18. Another containing a queen-6 totaled 16. The ace counted as 11 unless so doing would make the hand total exceed 21, in which case the ace counted as 1. If the card total in a hand exceeded 21 the player was busted and lost.

Trent was a casual blackjack player and knew some of these rules and was able to pick up the others as he watched the progress of each round. Finally, he was ready to play and asked the others whether they objected if he joined the game. Nobody said anything, although the old man with the white mane cleared his throat as if to protest, thought the better of it, and nodded in approval.

Trent started playing at a quarter to eight. Over the next three and a half hours he played like the amateur he was – sometimes winning by sheer luck, others losing by making serious errors or drawing lousy cards. He would stand on 16, ask for a hit on 18, split with a pair of tens in hand, double when his hand

was a mere ten, and so on. Much as he wanted to get up and go, he stayed at the table in the hope of making up for his mounting losses, which ultimately became most of the money in his briefcase. By eleven, he had been left with \$36,000, which he turned into thirty-six pumpkins.

On the first bet, which he opened with \$10,000, he had an ace and an eight (19) and the dealer showed a six. He doubled. The dealer's hidden card was a nine, totaling fifteen, and she had to draw again. This time she got a five, totaling 20. Trent saw his twenty orange chips be swept away. Down to his last \$16,000, he opened with eight thousand. He was dealt two nines, and the dealer also showed a nine. He split, putting his last eight chips on one of the nines. He then began drawing: for the nine on the left, he drew a queen and stood at 19. For the nine on the right, he drew a four and a seven and stood at 20. The dealer's hidden card was a seven, for a total of sixteen, and she drew again, a five: blackjack. All of Trent's money was gone. He got up and left the casino, hurling the empty briefcase into a garbage can. The fantasy was good while

it lasted, but now it was over and he had to go back to his original plan.

It was eleven forty and the crowds were even thicker and wilder. He sought refuge in the Stratosphere Tower at the north end of the Strip and stood in line to take the long elevator ride to the observation deck at the top of the tower, 921 feet above the Strip. From there he got a commanding view of Las Vegas: down the strip, the hotels and casinos blazed like multicolored jewels, surrounded in all directions by innumerable points of light. The dazzling display ended – as if cut by a knife – on an irregular border past which the desert showed itself as a mass of blackness poised to pounce on the city.

Going up on the elevator ride Trent contemplated plunging to his death from the observation deck. Once there, however, he realized his idea could not be implemented. For one thing, the edge of the tower was circled by a chest-high metal barrier that would have been difficult to climb even if Trent had been in better physical condition. In addition, gawking visitors roamed around the deck so that any attempt to climb out of the observation area would have been immediately spotted and thwarted.

So, he just took in the sights and reflected on the meaningless nature of all the activity. Las Vegas was but a reflection of the country and its culture of shallow optimism. It was built and subsisted on empty promises and hopes. To win big money. To get laid. To escape one's fears and anxieties. This special New Year's, people's expectations were heightened even more. He of course knew better.

Indeed, this millennium was as false as the hopes it inspired. 2000 was not the beginning of a millennium, but the closing of one. The real millennium would not start until 2001, three hundred and sixty-six days away. Trent was not going to wait for it. He went down to the street, feeling despondent as he trudged back to his motel.

Even there, the lobby was abuzz with revelers drinking, playing the slot machines, or watching TV accounts of the progress of the millennium across the planet. There had been no terrorist attacks, no Y2K disasters. The anticipated moment of time was moving westward and now was almost here, creeping towards Vegas.

In his room, he took off his clothes and drew a hot bath. He climbed into the tub, recoiling at the heat, and opened the package of single-blade razors he had purchased along the way. His last thoughts turned into a review of his life. He was a crook, for sure, but no worse than anybody else, and yet the law was after him. It was all so unfair.

His personal life had also been a pitiful mess. He had been cheated on and divorced by his two former wives, abandoned by his children. Nobody had shown him the love and respect he deserved. He never got a break.

Not for one second did he pause to think about his last transgression, or how he had eased Tomlison out of this world.

His reverie ended. Without further recriminations, he slashed both wrists and plunged into the steaming water watching it become pink with his trickling blood. He started to doze off as he welcomed his final sleep. No more losing for him. No more hell, at least not in this world.

There were loud bangs on his room door, followed by a key turning

the lock and cries by male voices: "FBI... you are under arrest." Brent slipped further towards nothingness as one of the voices, now at the bathroom threshold, exclaimed: "Jesus, this man is bleeding to death! Quick, call an ambulance..." Strong arms fished Brent's body out of the tub and laid him on the bed, while tourniquets made from towels were tied to both forearms halfway to the elbows.

"Will he make it?"

"Well, he has lost a lot of blood, but we caught him in time. He'll probably live to see another New Year."

"I wished we had tracked him down sooner. After he cashed the ticket at the Mandalay, we got his name from the receipt and began searching for him all over town. Of all nights!"

"Have we figured out yet how he and Tomlison pulled their scam?"

"No, we know that the TCU game was rigged, but we never discovered Tomlison's contacts. Maybe his accomplice will

uncover the mystery for us.”

“I wonder if we did him any favors by rescuing him. He’ll be extradited to California and has many tough years ahead of him in a federal pen in Atwater or Victorville. It may not have been lucky for him to have survived his suicide attempt.”

“Who cares? He will be getting only what he deserves.”

Outside, the big moment had arrived. A roar could be heard all over town, as car horns blared and confetti rained down from the Eiffel Tower and rose, swirling, in the Vegas night, amidst a light show that cast many beams towards the heavens.



Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and sixty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, “The Satchel and Other Terrors” is

available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.