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A Gamble of Trust: A Ten-Minute Play

Derek McFarland

Derek McFarland is a commercial aviation student from Pennsylvania.

Characters:

Aaron, 28

Maddox, 56

Time: Late Afternoon

Setting: Chain-link fence outside of a secluded part of a small-town horse race track.

(Lights on. Aaron is sitting on a cooler at the fence, looking through binoculars. He has a race card sticking out of the fence, and a beer in his hand. Enter: Maddox.)

MADDOX

(sneaks up behind Aaron)

That fool ain't gonna put the visor on her?

AARON

(spills beer on himself)

Jesus H. Christ!

MADDOX

I ain't akin to folk taking the Lord's name in vain.

AARON

I didn't think I would hear the shot that killed me.

MADDOX

Oh, you'll hear it. Clear as day. Clear as that starter's pistol, followed by the forever silence you only get to hear in the half-second when them horses cross the finish line, not even a chain link apart.

AARON

But see, don't you just love that? Heart in your throat, jaw clenched, palms so sweaty that they wipe away the ink on the race card? The "forever silence" might just be worth that.

MADDOX

(laughs in disbelief)

You'll toss anything in the ring, won't you, kid? I've seen folks gamble their cars, their houses, clothes, rings, watches. Hell, they even gamble their lives too, but you manage to do all that and feel good about it. No addict I know can manage that.

AARON

It's only an addiction if you ain't good at it, then it's called a passion.

MADDOX

That fancy college teach you that? What's the funny name for it? Dart Mouth?

AARON

It's one word, chief.

MADDOX

Oh, well, you'll have to excuse me. I understand the small-town Tennessee kid went to Dart Mouth and got himself educated. Now he's a big shot, correcting the common folks' speech as he swindles them out of their money. Says he uses it for his "passion." Well, I'd hate to be the bearer of bad news, but all that school did was teach y'all to put a foot in your mouth. How's that for irony? *(laughs at his own joke.)* Addiction is addiction. They're ain't no getting around that.

AARON

You're close, but you still have it wrong. I learned to put my foot in my mouth at Boston College. I learned about addiction by watching dudes at the Dartmouth frats while I was getting my Doctorate. And yes, I'm addicted to hooking people in the stocks, but I'm a hell of a gambler, you wouldn't know me for this long if I wasn't. I'd be just

another one of those weekday news stories. “Local broker found dead, DOW up to record high,” et cetera, et cetera. And maybe I gamble with my life, but you’ve beaten me. You’ve sold your soul to your boss.

MADDOX

Is that a fact?

AARON

Oh, that’s a fact. I’m in debt to you, but you’re OWNED by him. That’s why you’ve kept me around. You still need me, and you know I deliver. So, when you come at me with your little death threats and shots at my intellect, all it does is make me yawn. Maybe I’ll just let your boss know what you’ve been planning, let him drop you in a ditch, and I’ll take my winnings and go.

MADDOX

I don’t need you for one damn thing. I ain’t owned by him or any other sorry fool who thinks they’re untouchable. All of them are young fools just like you, and all of them will die young fools, just like you, if you don’t watch your mouth.

(Aaron forces a yawn.)

Don’t fuck with me, kid.

AARON

(chuckles to himself)

How original. Come up with that yourself or was it just something your cell mate would say when he wasn’t in the mood?

(Maddox tries to respond but Aaron cuts him off.)

Don’t try any of those witty shark comebacks with me. Y’all are the exact same. Carbon copies of each other. You want the money and I’m just about to cash my ticket in for you. It don’t matter that the field is sloppy. And it don’t matter that the back-up fool jockey is on the reigns. Dawn Star is the winner of this race, even without the fix on. I’ve been around horses all my life. I rode horses after school every day on my Pa’s ranch, and I’ve been to the tracks time and time again. When there’s that one gem of a mare on the roster, that royal flush of a stallion walkin round the track, I sniff it out. Look at me, chief. I can wear this Armani and any other Armani suit whenever I want.

That's what y'all couldn't figure out. You don't need to beat people to make the big numbers. You just gotta tell them they're getting rich, too. And while they're pissing their money away in the market trying to find the big winner, you spend it on your own vices.

(Maddox snatches the binoculars from Aaron and scouts the horses. Silence. Aaron paces a little, then turns back to Maddox.)

You really aren't gonna say anything to that?

MADDOX

You said not to try a witty response.

AARON

So now you're taking orders from everyone?

MADDOX

I ain't in no prison, kid. I ain't taking orders. I'm waiting on my money. You said the magic word. Fixed. That means I really am getting paid, and with the biggest vig I've ever held a man to in my lifetime.

AARON

Oh . . . well, yeah, chief, it's all worked out.

MADDOX

I'm sure you think that, but how.

AARON

My bro has this down to a science, no worries.

MADDOX

Science. I don't know much science, kid, but I do know people. People are dumb. Hard enough to get the fix on, but it's doable. I just don't know if you can collect. How do you plan on it?

AARON

Well, my bro is usually here with me, and he finds a third guy. A random fool. I mean

the porch lights are on, but no one's home. So months, maybe even years prior to a day like this, my bro tells the guy how much of an expert he is, right? He says, "Hey, don't believe my words, trust the cash. Bet on some prelims with me and you won't be sorry." Well, obviously, the prelims are fixed, so it works out great for the guy. Nothing huge, but enough to hook the guy and gain his trust. After a while, my bro calls him up and brings him out again. He gets him to bet huge on this one race. So when this guy wins, he freaks out and makes a scene, which makes it seem all legit. He collects his cash, and my bro takes him down to the stables. He tells him what's really going on, and now the guy is about ready to piss himself. I mean he'll do anything to keep this secret. Mostly because he's scared, sure, but it's also partly because he's still walking away with a good wad. My bro ain't here, though, so that just means that we meet somewhere out of town to get paid.

(Maddox smiles, hands Aaron the binoculars back.)

MADDOX

Your "bro" is a stockbroker, too.

AARON

So you HAVE figured out the easy way to make money.

MADDOX

Ain't nothing easy about it. It's a dirtier business than what I do.

AARON

(laughing)

How do you figure, chief? I'm working within the law. There ain't no blood on my hands.

MADDOX

My job might draw blood, but folk know exactly what they're getting into beforehand. It might not be within the law, but there's still rules. You borrow money, you pay it back. That's the end of the story. With you, they have no idea what they're getting themselves into, you just have them dive in head first.

AARON

They should learn not to blindly trust someone they don't know.

MADDOX

Is that how you justify it?

AARON
(*pause*)

No, I guess not. Is that how you justify what you do?

MADDOX

Not justify. Rationalize. In the thirty odd years of doing this, I've never been the one to pull the trigger on a man. Got folk who enjoy that sort of thing.

AARON

If you don't enjoy it, and you can't justify it, why are you here?

MADDOX

Well, I was a young fool once, like all the rest. Only I didn't die. I met a man who gave me a bit of direction. It was the wrong direction, sure, but it gave me purpose. Don't need to trust folk, just need to make them pay their dues. That man knew I was good at it, and he's had me doing this ever since. He was like a Pa to me.

AARON

So you don't trust anyone, just like me.

MADDOX

I ain't say that either. I said I ain't NEED to trust them.

AARON

So who can you trust?

(Aaron notices that Maddox has been fidgeting with his hands the whole time. He sees the ring, and he laughs.)

You've got a wife?

MADDOX

Fiancée.

AARON

Oh excuse me. Fiancée. What, she's waiting for you after work every day, for you to go, "Honey, I'm home"?

MADDOX

College boy still thinks he knows everything. She's in the ground kid.

AARON

(pause)

Oh...I'm sorry.... What happened?

MADDOX

My Pa happened. I was gonna call it a career for her. Live the straight life, own a ranch. She was something. Never a motive for what she did for me, except love. That's how you trust someone, kid.

AARON

You're Pa happened?

MADDOX

Yeah. He don't like losing money just either. If I leave, he loses money. She was killed the night before the wedding day.

AARON

Jesus.

MADDOX

Don't take his name in vain.

AARON

Sorry. So why didn't you try to kill him yourself? He killed the woman you loved.

MADDOX

There's still a code kid. Can't kill a man like that. He's got folk all over. I'd be dead, too. Can't stop working for him, cause, well, you guessed it. I'd be dead too, and I know my girl wouldn't want me getting myself a gravestone before it's time.

(another long pause)

AARON

You know, you're an alright guy.

MADDOX

(laughs)

Tell the kid a sap story and he gets all weepy.

AARON

(laughs with him)

Yeah I guess so. It's taken care of too, by the way.

MADDOX

How?

AARON

He got picked up in Knoxville for a drunk and disorderly. My Ma is the Assistant DA there. When she found out about the warrants for him in Biloxi, she had him transferred. You're clearly not the only shark to come out of there. I have guys there waiting for him. All my debts will be settled soon.

MADDOX

(voice cracks)

Well, that's a goddamn shocker. You might be good at that passion after all.

AARON

Thought you weren't "akin to folk taking the lord's name in vain."

MADDOX

Wasn't akin to other folk sinning like that. I do it all the time.

(They laugh. Aaron grabs a beer out of the cooler and hands it to Maddox.)

There's still the issue of my money. How do you know where to meet your "bro"?

AARON

He gave me his card with the address.

MADDOX

And you trust him enough to be there?

AARON

Enough to take the chance. And you know me. That's saying something.

(They both turn back to the track.)

MADDOX

Your gem of a mare is lined up.

AARON

Yeah. She's a beauty ain't she? I know the outcome, yet I still feel the rush. It ain't quite the Kentucky Derby, but it's still for damn sure the most exciting two minutes in sports. Can't wait for that Forever Silence right before the end.

(Sounds of the crowd getting louder, announcer over the speaker making the last of the introductions. Race just about to start. Starter pistol goes off. Crowd cheers. Smoke comes up from Maddox's hand. Aaron falls to the ground, binoculars and beer fly from his hands.)

MADDOX

There's your forever silence, kid. Can't have you killing the boss and living after.

(He bends down and pulls out Aaron's wallet. Pulls out a business card. Turns and walks of stage.)