

Newsom on the Market

Riverboat Gamblers

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The Mississippi riverboat has run aground, stuck on sand that reportedly -- though how anyone actually knows is beyond comprehension -- hasn't seen direct sunlight since dinosaurs roamed the continent. In a scene straight from the Titanic, the banjo quartet is playing its rendition of Huey Lewis' classic "Stuck on You" as passengers mill about. Unlike what happened on the Titanic, there is not a panicked fight for lifeboats, but instead a fevered search for alcohol. The boat isn't going to sink. There isn't enough water in the river for that.

Inside the boat, away from the blazing sun, a quartet of players huddle around a worn poker table staring at each other, their cards, or the weary dealer who has seen and heard it all over the course of the game.

Player No. 1 wears a frayed cowboy hat and is eating a chicken and bacon sandwich, no lettuce or tomatoes. Eating those would make him a vegetarian, a thought his industry just can't abide. Player No. 2 is wearing a seed company polo shirt and a cap emblazoned with his tractor of choice. Player No. 3 is a known moonshiner, despised by Player 1 and viewed as a greenhorn by the rest. Player No. 4 looks completely out of place in his pricey Italian shoes and fancy three-piece New York suit with money bulging at every pocket.

The table knows Player 4 holds almost all the chips. He alone can raise the stakes to the point the others will be forced to retire, bringing about an end to the game. He used to be terrible at the game and easy to bet against. In fact, Player 1 and Player 2 made a lot of money at his expense over previous decades. Now, though, a change in rules often leaves them at his mercy, a character trait he doesn't possess. His business card boasts the famous Gordon Gekko line, "Greed ... is good."

Player 3 has been around for a number of years, though only received financial backing to be a major participant back in 2005. Player 1 hates the fact that Player 3 is only in the game from a government grant, but there is no denying his presence changed the very nature of the game. Player 2 relies heavily on him, having improved his own financial position greatly due to their relationship. The moonshine business is hard, and vitriol from the community at large saw some of Player 3's financial backing taken away in recent years. The other players know his vulnerability, his personal margins razor thin with little to no margin for error.

Player 2 has made a lot of money recently, a LOT of money. So much so that he has become socially unpopular, in certain circles, though he doesn't really care. He has been through some bad times, lived through some sad times, but now lives a slightly more comfortable life. Ever cautious though, Player 2 is always wary -- almost to the point of paranoia -- that it could all come crashing down like a house of cards. He and Player 4 appear to be polar opposites, but down deep they are both gamblers at heart. The difference is Player 2 is mostly self-made,

though he knows his recent turn of luck has been due in large part to the game-within-a-game between Player 3 and Player 4.

Player 1 is angry. It is written all over his leathery face and work-gnarled hands. He's been around seemingly forever, always fighting for his place at the table. Way back when, he squabbled with Player 2 over the best use of land, a battle he largely lost. The last number of years Player 1 has been at odds with Player 4 due to dealings that left his holdings skewed to the point of lunacy, leaving him vulnerable to an ugly turn in financial standing. More recently Player 1's beef has been with Player 3, whose mere presence he believes makes his own existence almost impossible. The others around the table, including the dealer, are watching closely as Player 1 tries to broker a deal with outside interests to have Player 3's benefactor cut him off.

Each in their own way are nervous, waiting for the final card to be played in what has been a long, tumultuous game that began last March. All are expecting a low card to be turned, though none know just how low. Player 1 and Player 3, oddly enough, are hoping for a higher low card while Player 2 and Player 4 would be happy with an ace or deuce. Obviously cards, like politics, make strange bedfellows.

Back on deck as the players sweat from the late summer heat, an old man with wild white hair sits calmly in his chair smoking a pipe. He smiles like the humorist he is at the seriousness of the others' game, chuckling to himself about life on the Mississippi today as he waits for the riverboat to be freed.

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