Opal Ball

By Robert Reed

She is a player, like Cliff.

Like him, she is in her early thirties, healthy and single. And like the best in their profession, she is financially secure.

They meet entirely by chance, share a lazy dinner on a whim, and like any two players left to themselves, talk endlessly about the future. Who wins the next presidential race, and assuming her, will she win reelection? When will the next alien transmission arrive, and what treasures, if any, will it hold? (The GrokTrok signal still sits raw on everyone's mind.) Will the world's stock markets continue their steady ascent, or will their gains accelerate? "Accelerate," Cliff decides. But the graph is trimodal, she reminds him; a persistent gloom-and-doom wager is riding on the prolonged plateau. Cliff asks what the Chinese will do about Tibet. She asks what the U.S. will do with Free Alaska. They wonder if the Europa mission will find life, and will the United Council fund the Alpha Centauri mission, and when will the Sun finally extinguish its nuclear fuel. Then with a wink and a sly little grin, Cliff predicts who is going to win the next World Series.

That brings a hearty laugh from his new friend. Athletics have adapted to the new circumstances: Players and teams are rigorously balanced, while the fields of play have been made wildly chaotic. Each ball has its own weight and distinct shape. Winds are generated on site, gusting and swirling in random directions, while the grass grows and shrivels according to its own whims, and the soil folds into little lumps in all the worst places. With every modern sport, rules reward competitors with enormous scores, and they punish with fat penalties, and predicting the outcome of any game, much less the season, is impossible—which is the only reason people still are willing to cheer for the home team.

Dinner is a joy, and it doesn't take any unique vision to see what happens next. Hours later, lying beneath the perfumed sheets of his new lover's home, Cliff relates his own history as a player: Teachers and his own ego told him that he enjoyed a certain talent with science, so he began there. But he predicted a rapid solution to the telemeres problem with life expansion, and there is none. He wagered heavily on a quantum theory of gravity that subsequently proved to be flawed. And he made a fool of himself in deep-space astronomy, predicting no observable supernova in the Milky Way for the next thirty years. Which seemed perfectly reasonable, he points out, since stars explode infrequently and the last blast was seen just six years before. But wiser souls—real scientists, devoted hobbyists, and a multitude of crafty AIs—correctly assessed both the historic record and the stellar actuarial tables. The recent supernova had been decades behind schedule, and the next one could happen any time. Eighteen months, to be exact. Suddenly money that Cliff had set on a thirty-year shelf was yanked down and divided among wiser players. Which wasn't awful news, of course. It wasn't all that much money, he pretends. But Cliff's greatest failure—a genuine disaster—was his bold prediction that the next alien transmission would come within the newborn year, and it would prove as beneficial as the Sag Prime signal of '37. Both wagers proved to be spectacular mistakes. The sky was silent for the entire year, and then two days too late, the GrokTrok signal finally arrived, bringing the good people of Earth nothing but a gloriously colorful, highly detailed image of an alien's flower-like hind end, brazenly displayed to the camera and to the universe at large.

That's how Cliff got into human prediction, at last. Here was a realm with importance as well as important money, and no damned AIs to compete against. ("If machines ever master human dynamics, I'm sunk.") And better still, the young man had a genuine talent for seeing the obvious. "Which of these ten houses would make me happiest? What new activity or sport or hobby should I attempt? Which classic novel fits my soul best? And what sort of man, or woman, should I marry? If I marry anyone, of course." He read

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soul best? And what sort of man, or woman, should I marry? If I marry anyone, of course." He read the questions on the public boards, and if any tickled his interest, he examined the attached data tail. Biographies begged to be studied, including images and deep glances into these not-so-private lives. Certain questions interested him; who can say why? By various means, he looked past the tail, investigating these distant lives by every legal means. Then he looked again at the person asking for guidance, listening to the play of the voice, observing the tilt of the head and the nervous flicker of an arching eyebrow. That final gaze meant everything. Did he know this soul well

enough to offer help? And if so, how much did he want to help? Five dollars' worth, or fifty? Or maybe a fat hundred?

"Prince Randolph was my crowning success," Cliff mentions.

"Truly?" his lover purrs, ignoring the graceless pun.

Being a thoroughly modern man, Randolph had asked the world, "Which girl should I marry?" And the world responded with fascination and fantastic sums of money. Half a dozen candidates were put on public display. The prince's brief life was sliced open and examined in clinical detail. Questions were posted on his public board, and he answered them for everyone to see. Of course old lovers were sought out. A pleasant

mother and surly father offered a range of conflicting hopes and opinions. Then Cliff, along with another billion others —a shared intellect scattered across six continents, ten orbital cities, and the Moon—made their final wagers.

"I was one of those billion," his lover admits.

No small coincidence, that.

Then she continues, mentioning, "'None of these girls are worth marrying,' I told the prince." Which was what Cliff had decided, too. "But I made this substantial side wager," he boasts. "Randolph would settle for happiness and a certain woman twenty years his senior." And sure enough, six months later the heir to the British throne

married his one-time nanny, and Cliff was one of the six hundred and two players who had seen the future the clearest.

In reward, he received a substantial share from a small ocean of earnings.

"And guess what," his lover purrs. "So did I."

"No," he blurts. "Truly?"

"Truly," she says. Then from the darkness, she asks, "What do you think it means, darling? Two great players coming together like this?"

The future has always been an opaque crystal. Shamans and popes have always seen the obvious, predicting the seasons as well as the inevitabilities of life and death. Then came science and

computers, creating experts trained in every narrow field, and the future was a little less opaque. But even the most expert mind, armed with the finest tools, is limited. Is hamstrung. Every mind is finite; bias kills the most gifted visionary; and wishful thinking can do nothing but distort and then blind. It wasn't until humans and their smartest machines began to place wagers, risking money against tomorrow, that the future became a little more knowable, and workable, and for the serious player, a source of financial blood. Without question, this is a Golden Age. With a multitude of eyes peering into the great Opal Ball, the future is being revealed as never before. And the world has

never been as efficient or happy or half as flexible. Which only stands to reason: Unbiased observers have a better chance of predicting wars and economic downturns than do government officials and stock market mavens. No matter how brilliant, the individual is always dim next to the multitude. And no expert of souls and society can give the same shrewd personal advice that is delivered by just a few hundred busybodies looking at your little life. Cliff is a stellar example:

He was an avid cyclist until strangers did an analysis of his body and muscles, predicting that he'd prefer sculling across open water. It is an obscure sport, and he had no previous interest.

But sure enough, he quickly became one of the top thousand scullers in the country, and winning in any sport makes it into a thorough pleasure.

He believed that he adored Bach. But rock-and-roll from the last century is his new favorite, thanks to a few hundred invited suggestions.

He always wore blue, but black and white are his natural colors, and changing his wardrobe and the color of his hair has done wonders.

And now, purely by chance, the player-woman has come into his perfect life. Spent and happy, he drags himself home in the morning. But before he finally sleeps, he turns to the public board, asking the entire world, “Is this

the woman meant for me?" A twenty-four-hour window feels right.

Seed money can spark interest, which is why he places a thousand of his own dollars on YES. Then Cliff collapses in bed, sleeping hard till evening. And after a quick shower and a stimulant stew, he dresses in black and white before meeting his new love at what has already become their favorite restaurant.

Cliff's honest intention is to listen to the world. To hear its advice and absorb it, acting on its shared wisdom. But he is also in love—utterly, selfishly in love—and through the next night and into the morning hours, he assumes that of course the world will answer with a resounding, “YES." Yet the world votes,

“NO,” with a ninety-two percent surety. “She is not and will never be right for you." Cliff is sitting at home that next morning, exhausted again and this time feeling outraged. What to do, what to do? Finally, he decides to hide the results, at least for the time being. But she is a player—a believer by every measure—and of course she has already asked about Cliff and his worthiness. And the Opal Ball has come to the same unbiased and distinctly negative conclusion. Her response is a quick and impulsive rage. She flings the stupid results into his face, and she curses a thousand strangers, and in the next breath, she declares, “Let's show them. Let's get married. And I mean right

now."

The ceremony seems quicker than the ninety seconds that it takes.

The consequences are instantly apparent, ugly and sad and inescapable. Their first fight lasts an entire day, incandescent words leaving wounds not easily healed. And their last battle never ends. Even after the divorce, she and Cliff trade blows and furious looks, and sometimes he finds himself awake in the night, plotting the awful things that he could do to this monster-woman who stole four months out of his otherwise wondrous life.

Cliff vows: Never again will he doubt the advice of distant voices.

With the help of those voices, he

remakes his wardrobe and appearance. He lets them select a new larger home to serve his maturing needs. Against every past interest, he takes up topiary gardening and holopainting. And of course both hobbies are wonderful successes. Then he asks the world, "Where should I go on a long vacation?" And a week later, he and his new ocean-ready scull set off on a voyage down the Chilean coast.

While Cliff is busy fighting the stiff ocean currents, his ex-wife dies. A phone call delivers the news. Later, he learns the ugly particulars. Depressed and drunk, the woman posted her genetics and life history, and then asked the world about her own future. The

Opal Ball responded instantly, showing her nothing that seemed overtly appealing. Small victories in the game, brief relationships that always end badly, and a growing tendency for black moods. So with pills and a length of razored rope, she managed to save herself from years of obscurity and disappointment, and the half a hundred players who had predicted suicide quietly pocketed their winnings. Cliff feels embarrassingly happy for the first moment or two.

Then the sadness bears down, and he spends a full night sobbing wildly, ashamed of his actions and his glaring failures.

In the morning, an AI attorney contacts

him. Was Cliff aware that a three-month-old fetus currently sits in cold storage, and that he and the dead woman are the parents?

The news is an enormous, numbing surprise.

"She conceived during your marriage," the machine explains. "The abortion was apparently kept secret from you."

"What happens to it now?" Cliff blurts out.

The AI hands him a tiny freezer.

"Why did she do this?" he sputters.

"I'm no expert in human emotions, sir," the machine replies. "Thank goodness." She is born six months later.

Cliff's first act has become a tradition:

He places a picture of his daughter and the usual genetic information on the public boards, and then he prepares to ask the world, “What is this child's future?" But at the last moment, his hand hesitates.

His will fails him.

Or it exceeds what he believed possible, perhaps.

Before the damage is done, he wipes the question off the board. Then he returns to the new crib and peers into his child's eyes. Clearer than opals, they are. Transparent as crystal, and lovely, and when he peers inside them, every future seems real and assured, and lovely, and hers, hers, hers.