

Accidentally falling in love online is risky business, but this couple found success. A story which took twenty years to create and three years to write.

LUCK OF THE DRAW

A Love Story in 3 Countries, 2 States and 7 Cities

by Tom and Noemi Bradburn

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Destiny brought us together.
Love kept us together.

Luck of the Draw

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Table of Contents

1 - From a Jack to a Queen.....	1
2 - A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words	11
3 - Getting to Know You.....	21
4 - Hello Texas	31
5 - Tired of Waiting for You	41
6 - Back in Your Arms Again	51
7 - The Long Road Home.....	57
8 - Little Cabin in the Woods	69
9 - Do the Hustle	77
10 - Two of a Kind, Working on a Full House	83
11 - Turn, Turn, Turn	91
12 - Ocean Front Property	97
13 - The Big D.....	111
14 - The Big C.....	117
15 - We Were Soldiers	127
16 - California Promises.....	137
17 - Forever and Ever Amen.....	151

1

From a Jack to a Queen

Banfield, Argentina

It was a warm January evening, and Noemi Gonzalez was in a hurry to get home. Dinner with her girlfriends had been fun, but she was ready to relax and to spend some time with her son, Pablo. Work was stressful; word was out that a French corporation planned to buy out the water company where she worked as a district manager. Nobody knew what was going to happen. She didn't know if her job was safe, or if she'd be starting over after 32 years.

Noemi had had enough of starting over. She had been raising Pablo on her own for almost a decade and had finally divorced Pablo's father seven years before. That had caused quite a scandal in the family, and it was almost unheard of in Argentina. Her family was important, and it broke her heart, but she knew it was the right choice. So she had put aside many of the things she loved, like her friends and her passion for salsa dancing, to focus on the two things that mattered most: her son and her career.

Now, Pablo was 27 and a man and finding his way. They had been discovering a new dimension to their relationship, becoming good friends as well as mother and son. They were travelling and discovering their country together. Most recently, he had taken her skiing at Bariloche, and they had explored new restaurants, enjoyed peaceful strolls through the snow-covered village, and talked for hours. Noemi was starting to find some time for herself as well, going dancing and going to long dinners with old friends. Now that French company might take it all away.

When Noemi arrived, Pablo wasn't home. It was too bad, but Noemi had another way to blow off steam. She turned on her computer and headed straight for the virtual poker tables at Yahoo.com.

Pablo had been the one to introduce his mother to the wide world of the web. He was fascinated by other countries and cultures and was an expert at making friends online. She saw how much he enjoyed spending time in chat rooms, and one day she realized, “This could be an easy way to sharpen my English skills!” Her beloved father, Roberto, had insisted she learn the language as a child. It had been a great gift, and Noemi knew that gift would fade without practice, so Pablo taught her all about the internet, how to access chat rooms, and where to find new friends. She conversed with people from all over the world.

Of course, that included men. Several of those men had wanted to meet her in person. But Noemi had doubts. She knew that something was missing from her life, and she often wished she could find someone special. She’d been out on a few dates in recent years, but nothing important seemed to be on the horizon. She wasn’t going to settle, either. Noemi had suffered when her marriage had failed due to her husband’s infidelity, and in losing another relationship to alcohol abuse. She wasn’t sold on the idea of another long-term mess. So she resisted those men’s invitations to meet and concentrated on practicing her English conversation skills.

Then one night, bored with the same old conversations, she decided to try something new. Yahoo had ongoing poker games as well as chat rooms. She liked to play cards. Why not give it a try? It turned out to be a life-changing decision.

On this particular night, Noemi was cleaning up at Texas Hold ‘Em. She was on a winning streak that was starting to irritate the other players. But she kept taking their chips. Then, suddenly, an instant message popped up. It read:

You are a poker machine. You are the Poker Queen!

The screen name was “Miller Chime.” Not one of the other players. Who could that be?

Denton, Texas, USA

Tom Bradburn slowed down on the highway to let an 18-wheeler pass. Today, like every day for the past 3 years, he was fighting Dallas traffic to get home. Mentally, he tried to let go of the stresses of the day. He had recently cut back his workload from supervising 16 Sonic Drive-In restaurants to 5, but it was still tough to balance that with being a single parent. This traffic wasn’t helping. His teenage son, Eric, would be waiting at home, and Tom turned his thoughts to what he’d cook for dinner. He decided on pork chops and French fries, Eric’s favorite.

At last, he pulled into his parking spot at the apartment complex. He could see Eric standing outside, waiting for him. Walking to the door, he shivered a little in the cool January breeze. Then they threw their arms around each other, as usual, and walked inside.

Unfortunately, Tom’s worries didn’t stop when he entered the small apartment. Though they were close, he and Eric had been struggling recently. At 17, his son had decided he didn’t like going to school. And like any unsupervised teen would be tempted to do, he had been skipping a lot lately. Tom’s work didn’t leave time for the close parental attention Eric needed. They both hated these conversations, but Tom knew they’d have to discuss it this evening.

From the kitchen, he called, “How was school today?”

In front of the TV, Eric called back. “Great!”

Tom didn’t buy it. “Really?”

“Well, it was ok.” Eric’s tone was laid back. Too laid back.

“Have any homework?”

“I did it at school.”

Tom couldn't help sounding disbelieving. "Eric. Did you really?"

"Of course. Don't you believe me?"

Quickly, Tom added, "It doesn't matter whether I believe you or not. What matters is your life and what you're doing with it."

"Dad, don't start, ok?"

In the silence, the pan began to sizzle. He heard Eric's voice again, "What's for dinner?"

"Pork chops."

"All right!" Suddenly, life was good again.

After dinner, Tom washed the dishes while Eric dried, just like they had done every night since his son was 10. He knew that when they were done, Eric would retreat to his favorite video game, "The Legend of Zelda." He might as well plan to spend the evening on the computer he'd recently bought. Tom frowned as he pictured Eric on the living room floor, absorbed in Zelda, and himself in front of the screen in the bedroom. That seemed to be their world for the last few weeks. He didn't like that they no longer seemed to talk much, but Tom told himself, "At least we're together."

One thing Tom did like about his nights in front of the computer, it had reawakened one of his earliest passions: silver coins. In the early 1960s, Tom had worked as a carhop for a quaint little drive-in called Carroll's. Back then, everyone paid in silver coins. Tom loved them; they were beautiful. And he looked back with fondness on that job. As a young man, he had bigger aspirations than being a carhop. Of course, but he had enjoyed running the trays of orders out to waiting cars. And that was where he had seen his first Sonic, built right across the street from Carroll's in 1965. Tom had been hired by Sonic soon after it opened, and except for two years in the Marine Corps, Sonic would be Tom's professional home for over 37 years.

He was growing tired of the fast-food business, after so many years of service, and he was worried about his son, so his computer was a welcome distraction. Tom learned how to research and buy silver coins using the Internet. For the past six months, he had been buying cases of beautiful, untouched, uncirculated Silver Eagle dollars. Tonight, he had nine cases of 500 coins, each stacked on the floor next to his desk. He looked at the boxes, feeling fortunate that the coins inside were all his.

But tonight he decided to try something different. He glanced at his Yahoo page. His eye caught the words “Yahoo Poker.” Tom clicked the link.

That click opened an entirely new world, Tom created an account so he could access the virtual tables, and found one called “Hound Dog” that sounded good. An oval tabletop filled his screen. Nine chairs surrounded it, each with a little nametag in front of it on the table, with screen names on each one. In each chair sat a little cartoon character, representing a player somewhere in the real world. Tom could also see stacks of chips in front of each player, and each place showed two cards turned face down. In the center of the table sat five cards turned face up. Tom realized that he was watching Texas Hold ‘Em. The table was full so that he couldn’t join in, but that was ok. He was watching and learning.

“The Internet is amazing!” he thought. It was pretty cool the way everyone could bet and fold and win and take their winnings. The players could type messages to one another, like “Good hand” or “You dirty dog.”

After a few minutes, he noted that one player, a cartoon girl with a blonde ponytail, seemed to be taking everyone’s chips. “Noemigonz” was on a winning streak. The other players were getting annoyed, which Tom found comical. On a whim, he clicked her name to send an instant message:

You are a poker machine. You are the Poker Queen!

The reply came back:

Thank you... What is Miller Chime?

And just like that, the life-changing conversation began.

Tom: Have you ever heard of “Miller Time?”

Noemi: No

Tom: Miller is a beer in the U.S. Their advertisement says, “It’s Miller Time” ...I tried to make my Yahoo name Miller Time but it was taken. So I came up with Miller Chime.

Noemi: Oh, ok.

Tom: My name is Tom, what is yours?

Noemi: Noemi...I’m pleased to meet you, Tom.

Tom: I’m glad to meet you, Noemi.

Tom: How long have you been playing?

Noemi: About 15 minutes.

Tom: No, I mean, how many years have you been playing Texas Hold ‘em?

Noemi: Ha. Sorry...2 years.

It’s a fun game; you should play.

Tom: I’d rather talk to you right now.

Noemi: Thank you, would you like to go to a private room?

Tom still didn’t know a lot about the Internet, but he had heard of cybersex. He wondered, “Does this mean we’re about to have sex right here online?” He told Noemi that he didn’t understand, and she explained that a private room was a safe place to chat where no one could read what they said. Ok, so maybe not sex. Tom typed in,

Oh, Ok...But I don’t know how to do that.

Noemi promised that she'd take care of it and be right back. Then a box popped up on Tom's screen that read:

Someone wants to chat with you. Click here to chat with them.

Tom clicked, and another box popped up.

Noemi: Hello.

Tom: Hello, poker Queen.

Noemi: "Ha-ha...I like to play; you should try it.

Tom: I will someday, but right now, I am happy that Yahoo Poker allowed me to meet you.

Noemi: Yes, I am also glad for that.

Tell me about you. Where do you live? Do you have children?"

Tom: I live in Denton, Texas, and I have 2 sons; Eric and Jeff. How about you?

Noemi: Very nice names, Eric and Jeff.

I live in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and I have one son. His name is Pablo.

Tom: Wow...we are very far from one another.

This is the first time I have ever done anything like this.

How did you know how to open a private chat?

Noemi: My son taught me.

Tom sat back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and thought, “Wow.” This was his first experience with Internet chat, and his excitement ran wild.

Noemi: You are not married, are you?

Tom: No. Are you?

Noemi: Oh, no, I am not married.

Tom suddenly remembered something else he'd read about the Internet.

Tom: I am a man. I suppose you are a woman, huh?

Noemi: Oh, yes. I am a woman. ... This is difficult. Isn't it?

Tom: Oh well, this is about as good as chat gets, I suppose. If you give me your email address, I will send you an email and tell you about me.

Noemi: Okay. It is noemigonz@cbs.com, and what is your address?

Tom: tcb3@airmail.net

Noemi: Okay, thanks.

Tom: I will go and send you an email now. Okay?

Noemi: Okay, that will be great.

Tom: Bye for now.

Noemi: Bye...Pleased to meet you.

After signing off, Noemi went to the refrigerator for some water, she thought about this Tom guy. “Is he a real person?” she wondered. “Will he send me an e-mail?” She stared out the window for a few moments, thinking about the evening. Then she smiled and headed for bed.

Meanwhile, Tom typed, full of a new kind of excitement. He told this Noemi woman all about his life, his job, his family, and his past. He searched to learn about her. Then, seeing it was late, he turned off the computer and called Eric to get ready for bed.

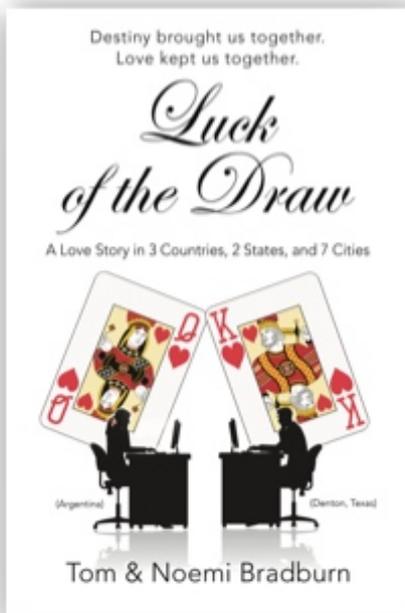
“Who were you writing to on the computer?” his son asked.

“Just some girl from Argentina.”

“Argentina?! What can you do with a woman in Argentina?”

Tom chuckled, “Just talking, Son, just talking.”

In bed, he lay awake for a long time, wondering about this Argentina lady. Who was she? What kind of life did she have? At last, his brain full of questions, Tom drifted off to sleep.



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