

The Preacher's Transgression

By
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The onlooker was eating his lunch. He was about to polish off a chili dog and what was left of a large root beer when he thought the time was about right to approach the young man at table 12. The observer knew the kid wasn't going anywhere; it was painfully obvious he needed the practice. I'll give him another minute or two, he thought. He leaned back and patiently waited. After a short time he decided that the kid was ready for his expertise in the fine art of pocketing a ball. He picked himself up from the high comfortable chair that could spot all action in the house and ambled over to table 12.

"Looks to me like you got a problem young fella!" began the old man, showing earnest concern. "You just a little off on your aiming."

"Man, this don't figure. Check it out. I ain't makin' two balls in a row," replied the kid, disgruntled. It was obvious he wasn't pleased with his practice session.

"I ain't blind. Anybody can see that!" said the old man. "You ain't gonna go fer shootin' like dat dare. What you is needin' is my assistance. Show me a Mr. Grant... and I'll show you the best thing goin' fer linin' up shots."

"For only fiiiffff-ty bucks!" mocked the kid with a laugh, stretching out the fifty part.

"Guaranteed one hundred percent success," assured the old man.

The kid rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "And I'll never miss another ball, riiiiight!"

"Hey man," the old gentleman continued, "... look at it dis way. Ifen it don't help... you get your fifty back. Whatch-cha got to lose Holmes? The tournament will start and you won't be ready. You be out there left out in left field. Shootin' like dat, whew. I'd hate to be in your tenny shoes, even if they is the hunnert dollar brand."

"Don't be insulting me pops, these happen to be the two hunnert-dollar brand - best on the shelf." The kid takes another shot. The painful expression on his face tells the old timer he's thinking about the offer.

"Fifty bucks... guaranteed... right?"

"You got it, my man! In fact, I'll give you fifty if it ain't everything I says it is. Cain't beat dat type o'guarantee."

"Okay pops, you got yourself a deal!" The kid peeled off half a hundred and tucked it in the old man's shirt pocket. "Now lay this great straight-away aiming system on me."

The old man pulled out the bill, grinned at Mr. Grant then stuffed it back in his shirt pocket. "Easy! See those three lightbulbs hangin' over the table?"

"Yeah... so?"

"Notice their reflection on top of the balls."

"One mow time, yeah... so?"

"So this, my man," the old timer continued. "You aim from the light reflection off the cue ball to the light reflection off the object ball. Go 'head on; check it out."

The kid eyed the old man suspiciously. "This ain't the most ridiculous thing I ever heard, but it show-does come close." The young man took aim on the '4' ball, stroked three times then rifled it into the side pocket. The '5' ball followed, then the '6', the '7', on to the '8', and finally the '9'. Ten minutes later the kid still hasn't missed a shot.

"Works... huh!" said the old timer, displaying an ear to ear grin.

"I can't believe it pops. I ain't missed a damn ball in ten minutes."

"Then I have your permission to keep the fifty?" declared the old timer, as he rubbed the bill between his finger and thumb.

"Yes sir. You just gave my confidence a large boost old man. Look out world," half yelled the kid. "Line up suckers! Just .. line .. your .. selves .. up .. right .. here. Form .. that .. aisle .. off .. to .. the .. right, ho, ho. Don't push .. don't shove or fight .. just relax and watch these balls .. drop .. right .. out .. of .. sight." As the kid spoke each word he pocketed another ball. He snapped his fingers then drilled the '10' and '11' balls into the corner pocket. A heavy 'ker-plunk' sound echoed from the bottom of the leather pocket.

"You just shootin'em in like John Wayne, partner... pow... pow," said the old timer, aiming his finger at the pocket that the last ball disappeared into. He began to chuckle. "Yes sir, just like John Wayne." He looked around for a chair, found one and pulled it up close to the table. He wanted to keep an eye on the kid's progress. It was obvious that the young man was thrilled with his new-found shooting ability.

The well-dressed gentleman standing at the refreshment counter scanned the room. After spotting the kid at table 12, he picked up his gear and headed in that direction.

"Hello!" he said. "You are shooting remarkably straight young fella. I would venture to say that you would be in the same class the likes of say, Johnny 'Big Ragu' Ragusa or St. Louis Tommy Jones. Do you ever miss?"

"Yeah, not bad!" said the kid with a matter-of-fact tone. "I think I'll rip off that tournament Saturday!"

"I can see that you are a man of strong conviction, sir. So ardent and serious in your pursuit of perfection. I do not believe another could stand against your strong will. Perhaps I shall purchase your talents in the auction."

"You can try," sneered the kid, who suddenly developed a boastful attitude. But, I'm-a warnin' ya, I'm hittin' them so good, man... I'll prob-blee buy my own self and pay twice as much as I should, ha ha." The kid let out with a prolonged laugh while drilling the remaining six balls off the table in rapid succession.

"I don't blame you, sir. As good as you are shooting..." The stranger wasn't allowed to finish the sentence as the kid rudely interrupted him. The kid was becoming more arrogant now that he had overcome what just a few minutes earlier was a flaw in his shooting. His true personality had come to the fore. His real self revealed to the old man and to the stranger what he really was - a brash punk with an inflated ego. All of a sudden he didn't want to play the game for the sake of enjoyment, or friendly competition. No sir. Now he was ready and willing to take full advantage of this stranger and anyone else who came his way. He'd flex his muscles; take their money; show'em who rules the felt; stick'em bad. They'd get a lesson they'd never forget and pay dearly for it. The old timer brought life back into his game. What was rocky earlier was now ironed out; smooth. And he was thinking it was about time he proved to the world that he had finally arrived.

"Cut the crap, pops," interrupted the kid, using a most disrespectful and insulting tone. "Why you over here anyway? You lookin' for a game or somethin'?"

The stranger rubbed his chin and thought for a couple of seconds, "Well, we do have time for a set or two. I surely wouldn't embarrass you by offering a mere pittance as I know your time is worth money."

"That's right! My time is money... big money. How 'bout two hundred a set; race to nine; if you don't think you'd stroke out under the pressure!" The kid stopped shooting long enough to eye the stranger. He winked at the old man as he waited for an answer.

"Rack'em... my son," the stranger said, allowing a wide grin to cross his face. His dark eyes gazed on the kid. How brash, how impudent. He has seen this kind before. The stranger reached for his case. Slowly he opens it and takes out the two-piece immaculately preserved cue stick. He eyes the tip. It wasn't the shaft he wanted. He slid the shaft back into the case and brought out the second one. After screwing the shaft and butt-end together the stranger pulls out a piece of cotton cloth to lightly rub down the shaft before applying chalk. He lifts his eyes toward the ceiling. "Thank you Lord!" he says. "Give me strength and I shall do everything in my power to lead this lamb who has gone astray and put him back on that righteous path."

The kid turned to the old man a second time and winked. "This cat is in so much doo-doo he may never get the smell off. If he only knew what you and I know... right old timer?" The young punk smiled again showing off a big gold tooth up front. "Yes sir. I'm gonna get my fifty back with Mr. B.I.G. on the side. If you can get a bet down better do it fast. Once I get started it ain't gonna take long to send this dude packin'; and it ain't gonna be a pretty sight."

"Kid!" interrupted the old man. "Don't you know who that is? That's the Preacher. That's one bad Jose!"

"Man, can't you dig it; I don't care if it's Bad Leroy Brown. If he be a Preacher, he better be having a couple fast prayers on hand cause he gonna be needin' 'em before this day's done. He gonna be wishin' he'd never left the pulpit." The kid was showing way too much cockiness.

The old timer spoke up again. "Kid, you're good, real good. But I'm-a telling ya, dat ain't nobody to fool with... the Preacher."

"So he a Preacher-man! Well, I be givin' him something to sermonize about come Sunday. I'm about to do this cat a favor, man... by making sure he has a topic. It be 'Practice what I Preach'." At that, the kid let out with a snickering type of laugh. "I figure I'm kind-a like a messenger of the Lord. Like, he was sent here to me to cleanse his spirit and free him from one of his transgressions, ya'know... and not to mention show him the way back on that road to recovery." Another snickering laugh followed.

"Just think pops," continued the kid, "...while he be up there on that pulpit Sunday giving guidance and spiritual comfort to all those lost and misguided souls, I be here counting all dis money, ha ha ha." The kid paused reflecting for a moment about the pleasant event that was about to take place.

"You just sit yourself right there, rest your bones and watch me dish out some heavy duty hurt. I can't wait." The kid reached up and rubbed his chin as in giving the situation serious thought. "Let's see, how much I be winnin' today; five hundred; six hundred; maybe a big 'G'!" The thought of what he just said brought another big smile to his face. The gold tooth sparkled when he turned toward the window. "Yeah... a grand. Rack them dudes, man. We be gettin' dis train on down the tracks."

Two hours and forty minutes later the kid emptied his pockets onto the pool table. He counts out six one hundred-dollar bills and hands them over to the Preacher.

"I don't understand it, old timer!" whispered the kid, shaking his head in amazement. "For ten minutes I don't miss a ball... ten whole minutes... ten long minutes... ten damn minutes... then, all of a sudden ... I don't know, man... I just don't know!"

The old timer reached up and pats the kid on the shoulder to console him. "You didn't lose by much, kid. All three matches were close, 9-6, 9-7 and 9-7 again. It just wasn't in the cards. Maybe next time, after you've perfected your aim." It didn't seem to help. The kid didn't say another word. The old man walked him to the door and waved him off.

The Preacher looked around the room; no one was watching. He reached up under the table lights and screwed in the middle bulb that he had loosened prior to the start of the match. A delighted beam of a smile crossed his lips. He straightened his parson's jacket and adjusted the black string tie that matched his wardrobe. A small carryon towel was pulled from the cue case to wipe his hands. Then he carefully unscrewed his cue stick. The Preacher wiped off any excess chalk that was present then placed it inside his specially made cue case. Preacher turned and watched as the old man escorted the kid to the exit. As Preacher made his way to the refreshment counter he whispered, "Forgive him his sins, Father, for he knows not what he does. Blessed be the Lord our Savior!" Preacher pats the pocket where he placed his winnings. The Preacher truly hoped the young man had learned his lesson and became a little wiser.

The old timer greeted Preacher at the refreshment counter. The man of the cloth had a large root beer and two glazed doughnuts waiting. With an outstretched hand the old timer grinned, "How'd we do partner?"

Preacher grins back, "You know how we did you old back-alley hustler. Don't be playing down and don't be talking down to me like you were to that green-belly kid there. Question is, do you want to keep the fifty or do you want this?" Preacher slides a sealed envelope across the counter toward the grinning man.

"I think I might take a chance on this," the old man said, picking up the envelope.

"I thought you would," said the Preacher, tapping his finger on the counter. "Give!"

"Huh!" the old timer uttered with a straight quizzical expression. A two-second pause followed before he broke out with another grin. The old man reached into his shirt pocket and brought out the fifty-dollar bill and laid it on the counter. "Oh, I almost forgot. Here, Preacherman, this is for you. I donate this to your congregation."

Preacher fingered the half C-note from the counter. He glanced at it nonchalantly, first from the front side and then turned it around and glanced at it from the back side. The old man looked on curiously. The long-time pool hustler and man of the cloth knew President Grant would do a lot of good for his ole buddy. With a smile on his lips and a slight twinkle in his eye the Preacher stuffed the bill back into his pal's shirt pocket.

"Oh, no Preacher. I'm cool man, really!" the old man said, tapping the vanilla envelope in his hip pocket. "We're partners, man. I got my fair cut." It sounded almost apologetic. Before the Preacher got one word out of his mouth the old timer hurriedly said, "But... if you insist..." and quickly tucked Mr. Grant out of sight.

"I think I'll go rest my weary bones over there on that nice comfortable cushion and take care of these glazed doughnuts and jumbo root beer. Good luck to'ya in the big one Preach. Thanks for the action and for bringing back some good ole memories. Let's do it again real soon."

"Got to go old timer," said the Preacher, holding out his hand. The Preacher packed up his gear, waved and headed for the door.

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