

Snowstorm

Fred ambled over to the window of his 18th floor room in the east tower of John Ascuaga's Nugget and took a look.

The TV weathercaster had announced, with an urgency in her voice, that a winter storm warning was in effect for the Washoe Valley. Fred thought the gal was a bad actress, but he enjoyed looking at her rack when she turned sideways to point out the approaching front on the studio weather map. It was dark outside and he couldn't see shit, barely any lights, so he figured okay it was snowing, and he showered and headed back down to the casino lounge.

There was a country band onstage now, four scruffy dudes with hats and leather vests, but more fun than the oldies act that was up there earlier. The bartender was a new guy, friendly, and he set Fred up with a scotch and soda in the middle of the big horseshoe bar, and Fred took a long sip and thought this wasn't the worst place to pass a little time, you know it?

He was supposed to head to Murraysville tomorrow, a couple hours up 395 and call on someone at Fish and Game. Then Thursday down to a customer in Carson City. Finish it off Friday in Elko at a health club, which they called gyms now. Back home to Gilroy middle of the night, the weekend dicking around the apartment, watching some ball, then the same routine next week in Fresno County.

After a while the band shifted to a little western swing, and they were pulling it off pretty good with a fiddle and pedal steel worked into the mix, when a big lumbering kid sat down next to Fred. The guy put a plastic cup full of quarters on the bar and ordered a Bud Light.

“Course if I was looking to make some real money,” the guy started in, “it’d be strictly at the tables.”

Fred hoped the kid wasn’t talking to him exclusively but the bartender was busy and the nearest patron was a couple stools away. So he said, “Craps?”

“No,” the guy said, “Twenty-one. But you knew that, right?”

Fred turned toward him, slightly irritated, because he'd been focused on one of the cocktail waitresses as she jiggled around loading her tray. "Matter of fact I did. The house doesn't like it when you jump your bets, is my understanding."

"There you go," the big kid said. "So you're a player then."

"Nah," Fred said. "I'm not great at math."

"No, the math part, that's a misconception. There's some basic arithmetic involved in keeping the count, nothing complicated. What it is, is a technique. You practice."

Fred had been perfectly comfortable before this guy showed up, and all he wanted now was a simple re-fresh on his beverage and to listen to the band and take in the female scenery. He should have left it alone, but he said, "You're full of shit . . . How 'bout that?"

The kid surprised Fred by smiling like he expected it. "So what's this low-life doing fooling with the quarter slots, he's so smart . . . Right?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Fred said.

“Well, blackjack, counting cards and so forth, you have the edge long term. You do. But stuff can happen.”

“In the short run,” Fred said.

“You got it,” the guy said, polishing off his Bud and signalling for another. “What’re you here for anyway?”

“I’m passing through,” Fred said. Not wanting to but adding, “What about you.”

“You strike me as being in sales. If you’re not, you could be. You’re a straight shooter, which is a good quality.”

Fred decided he didn’t like this guy at all.

“Anyhow,” the kid was saying, “answer your question, I’m giving a seminar tomorrow. Hey, you should come. It’s right in the hotel.”

“I’m heading out tomorrow,” Fred said.

“Maybe not,” the guy said. “We got one really blowing out there, not supposed to let up.”

“I got four wheel drive,” Fred said, “and I know what I’m doing. But thanks.”

“Not a problem,” the kid said. “Here, take my card anyway, you never know.”

Fred looked at it. It said: *Mike Pennman, Kindle Publishing*. There was a website.

“Books?” Fred said.

“Sort of. Online shit. The actual book part doesn’t count for much, the money’s in the marketing.”

Fred was feeling a slight headache creeping up on him. “You’re all over the place there, son. You lost me . . . Plus you’re getting on my nerves, if you want to know the truth.”

“I’m sorry, I get carried away. The thing’s free, incidentally. In case.”

“And then what, you sell ‘em your three hundred dollar course?”

“After I rope them in, yeah,” the kid said. “Though mine’s at \$497 currently. The 7 at the end is apparently effective, subliminally.”

Fred had never been to Murraysville. He tried to picture the Fish and Game building, guessing it was in the center of town, adjacent to City Hall, across from an old-fashioned square with a war memorial in the center.

“It work?” he said.

“The method?” the guy said. “Or the seminar business?”

“Whatever the fuck, I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Well, the method did work, until they kicked me off Amazon.”

“Is that right,” Fred said.

“What happened, they’re paying you for page reads, okay? Then they changed it, the way they calculate them, and everyone’s income plunged. Took me a while, but I figured out a loophole. I was making over twenty grand a month at my peak, which lasted two months. Then they pulled my titles.”

A woman had staggered up on stage and asked the band if she could sing one. Fred said, “And I won the Olympic downhill in 1984.”

“It sounds insane, I know,” the kid said.

“What we need to establish,” Fred said, getting into it, “is where I skied to victory. Bet you a C-note . . . Which should be nothing at all for a millionaire like you.”

The kid laughed and said, “I respect your style . . . How about this -- you win, I’ll fix you up with one of my

four hundred ninety seven dollar courses. On the house.”

Fred considered it for a moment, wondering did being a card counter mean you had one of those photographic memories too? But he liked his odds. “Go for it,” he said.

“Well I used to race a little bit, growing up in Idaho,” the guy said. “Even though he was way before my time, the guy we idolized more than anyone: Bill Johnson, out of Boise.”

Fred was starting to feel sick.

“Billy was cocky,” the kid continued, “but he backed it up . . . first American man ever to win it . . . the video’s still around, you see it on YouTube.”

Fred watched it now and then over the years. It was one of his favorite sports moments. He said, “Frank Gifford and Bob Beattie on the call . . . I never cared much for Gifford, except on that one race.”

The kid said, “I know. Especially the part where he goes, ‘... but Johnson has always been good on the bottom! -- he can make it up!’ “

“Billy heading for home, the clock ticking in the corner of the screen,” Fred said.

“And the time to beat in the other corner,” the kid said. “Which was the great Pirmin Zurbriggen, from Switzerland.”

Fred wasn't sure he had the full hundred bucks on him. He said, “So what do you got?”

“Sarajevo,” the kid said. “The '84 winter games. If you'd picked a boxing question or something, there would have been no way.”

Fred said, “You're good. Sarajevo, with the Olympic village and the ice arena and shit. But the mountain where Billy won gold that day, that was in a little town called Belasnica.”

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He had to admit, the in-room coffee wasn't bad, and he flipped open the computer and checked the road conditions. It had snowed all night, but not to the extent everyone was having conniption fits over, and 395 was still open.

That kid in the bar, he was a pathological liar, Fred was pretty sure. But at least he was colorful, and Fred

decided he liked him okay after all, especially after the guy gave him credit for being clever in winning the bet.

Seven a.m. rolled around. He didn't care for his job, repping products the world didn't need, in this case a piece of hardware an institution or commercial operation could hook up to its heating and air conditioning system to save a few bucks.

He didn't care for the similar jobs before this one either, but one thing he was, was reliable. He was on time and never cancelled.

Still, what would it hurt this once? The Murraysville Fish and Game person would understand about the driving conditions -- and if not, then screw 'em. And Fred's thoughts turned to the all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet that was to the right of the main lobby, and that's where he went.

The best part about these things, he concluded, was the bacon. At your chains such as Denny's, or even your down-home small town main street joints, they gave you about two pieces, and if you added a side order, for like five bucks, you got another three. Here, he overflowed

his plate and cracked open the guy's seminar package on how to make money in Kindle publishing.

For your \$497 you got three booklets and bunch of CD's, which seemed outdated, though you could apparently sign in to a secret link and watch the whole shebang on video. The guy, Mike Pennman, if that was his real name, did lay it out in organized fashion. First you had an overview of the business, then a breakdown of the profitable niches, then the sub-categories and so forth. All leading to a prioritized daily plan.

Fred was stuffed and thought about going outside and stretching his legs, but instead he fed a couple dollars into a machine, ordered a 7 and 7 from the slots maid, and took it with him into the casino's version of Starbucks, where he found a nice high-backed easy chair. What the hay, he decided, might as well hang out and wait for the guy's seminar. He supposed he should call the Murraysville person, and alert his boss in San Jose as well, but really, what was the point, and he shut off his phone.

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Fred surveyed the room and estimated maybe a hundred and fifty or so doofuses had shown up. Mike was a charismatic speaker, and by the end he had a lot of them excited, the way a Tony Robbins disciple had done it one time at a lecture on closing the deal that Fred had been required to attend.

One expression that both that guy and Mike seemed to favor was ‘take action’. Mike didn’t give the audience much substance, it was almost entirely a motivational ninety minutes, starting with his hard-luck upbringing and slacker bad choices, which had him going the wrong direction until he woke up to it all one day and took action.

When it was over there was a polite round of applause and most of them filtered out, but a good fifteen or twenty lined up for Mike, Fred thinking they’d be saying hello and asking a few questions, but no, son of a bitch, they were one after another pulling out the credit cards and forking over the money for his get-up.

Fred waited while Mike finished with the final buyer and packed up the powerpoint screen and projector. “My man,” Mike said. “Buy you a beer.”

Mike walked him across the casino floor to the Slider Lounge, a cozy bar Fred hadn't been aware of, tucked back behind the sports book. A guy was performing solo, singing cover songs with synthesized back-up.

"You take someone like that," Fred said after they were settled in, "and you wonder what the difference is, him and the ones that make it."

Mike said, "I was thinking the same thing. This guy's pretty dang close to what you hear on the radio."

"Well, maybe he simply didn't take appropriate action."

Mike smiled, "Fuck you."

"With my limited math," Fred said, "I came up with seven grand. Rounded off. Fifteen times \$497."

"Yeah well, don't forget now, I had to spring for the space. Plus some print ads, a couple radio spots. Not to mention the manufacture of the packages and so forth."

"Of course. And your gas . . . Where you from?"

"I'm not," Mike said. "I keep moving . . . The key to the whole thing is--"

"Organization," Fred said.

“You’re not bad.”

“And the lifetime unlimited email consultations. I’m guessing those help out too.”

Mike said, “You notice, I don’t play that card until they’ve got one leg over the fence and are needing just a tad more persuasion to get there.”

“I picked up on that . . . You good for ‘em?”

“It normally doesn’t come down to that, as most of my customers fade away in a reasonable amount of time. Now and again, someone’ll stay real active, and I’m forced to . . . take action -- as you put it.”

Fred was trying to think, in case he never went back there, was there anything in the apartment in Gilroy he needed, or would he be good?

He said, “So what’d you net just now? You don’t mind my asking.”

“In there? Five or six, give or take.”

Fred gave it a minute. “The thing of it is,” he said, “I witnessed it with own eyes. But you’re still full of shit.”

“I am?”

“So if I . . . started doing the same thing . . . how would that be?”

“Hard to say. What would the subject matter be?”

“Your subject matter.”

“You mean . . . booking your own gigs and working the room? . . . And using my stuff, or maybe even re-packaging it as your own?”

“Yep. All that.”

Mike let out a faint whistle. “You’d do that?”

“I’m going to,” Fred said.

Mike stood up, big-boned and raw, and Fred noticed a thin scar that extended from the bottom of his chin up toward his right ear. For the first time Fred pictured a dangerous side of Mike, and he was afraid he might punch him out, but Mike went up to the bar and came back with two more beers, and Mike nursed his a while.

“Well, you’d owe me forty percent,” he said.

“Forty, my ass,” Fred said.

“You know . . . your piss-poor attitude is reminding me of a scene from one of my favorite old movies.”

“Oh yeah? . . . You mean, where they’re trying to get the backwoods guys to drive the cars down the river for ‘em?”

“And Louis, he says ‘my ass’ to the guy’s price. Standing up to him.”

“Testing him . . . Burt Reynolds. That was a performance.”

“If he didn’t win something for that, he sure as shit should have.”

“Make it ten,” Fred said.

“Fifteen,” Mike said.

“You won’t see me,” Fred said. “I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Un huh.”

“It’s a big country,” Fred said.

“We’ll find out,” Mike said.