

Glenn Dwiggins

Smoke

I am older now, thinks Schmidt, straightening up from the billiard table after missing a shot, *much older now, and don't have as much energy as I had back then*. He picks up his burning cigarette from the slot in the ashtray.

"Your shot," he says to Riley, and Riley pulls himself out of his own thoughts to lean against the edge of the table. Like Schmidt, he had been thinking about something else, but it's the game for him now.

Now it is Schmidt who thinks about something else. He thinks about himself, when he was going to college, smoking. Back then he would take long, hard deliberate pulls, in a half-serious attempt at pulling the orange glow all the way back to where the filter connects with the tobacco, all at once, so he could continue with what he was doing, or maybe light another cigarette. He's smoking now, but hardly breathes the smoke in at all; what little filters past his throat settles dry like dust on the insides of his lungs. The rest floats up and around him, filling the cracks of his face and wandering in his hair, resting like feathers in his thinning, smoke-colored curls. He seems to feel it there. *Even if I had as much energy now as I did then, I wouldn't know what to do with it*, he thinks. He pauses. The cigarette and his fingers holding it are at about the level of his chin, and he thinks maybe he should quit smoking. *But that takes energy, too, and I really don't have that to spare*.

What he won't admit, or think about, is that the hypnotic effect

of the smoke's silent, soft flight, as it curls off wave-like into the yellow lamplight, would wash him into something like a cloud-life. The cloud surrounds him and everyone in the bar with him, and carries them off to somewhere else, where the always-blowing, always-changing winds that envelop the bar and all of New Regensburg in confused, chaotic energy, that threaten to pull apart the walls and erode the core of his peace of mind are stilled, and he shouldn't mind walking outside anymore, in fact he would even like to. The sun's bright light is filtered through this cloud to a dull but not oppressive gray, that still provides enough light. It is like the easing dimness of dusk, which leaves bright sunlight only on the taller buildings, and even this light is somewhat yellowed. This cloud-life is one into which he can fit, not like Edge of Town Road on these awful days of the annual airshow. The noisy planes are in the air and more cars are on the road than it can really handle, and they are all from strange places, and drive at strange speeds. There is all this and the wind blowing past his ears making long, thunderous noises and pulling at his hair and forcing his eyes shut, because the dusty wind seems to make the sunlight even brighter to him, and the planes seem to make the wind more violent. Living like this takes much of his energy, and he is always especially tired when the airshow is in town.

In this cloud-life, the people all move at the same speed, as if they were all in this bar, moving quite slowly, as if in a pause, like the wonderful pause when the wind is about to change directions. The only noise is the sound of glasses and ice and whispers. Schmidt feels this life, but he doesn't think about it. He puts the cigarette into his mouth and thinks, again, *perhaps I should quit*.

He now leans up against the wall and perches halfway onto a narrow wooden stool. He looks closely at Riley through his own Winston cloud, as Riley moves away from the same wall and bends down closer to the table, cue in hand. It is always this way. And Riley, when Schmidt is playing, does the same thing, watches his every move, as if he is concentrating on it alone. Looking at them from a distance, except that they don't look alike, we might think that they were like a pair of twin birds, leaning up, absorbed in thought, seemingly about the other, and then bobbing down in slow

motion toward the table, positioning the cue against the felt, making a short, quick stabbing motion, only to come back up again to watch the other. Only when we move much closer, we can tell that there is much that goes on that is quite different between the two. And the nearer we get, the greater the differences become, as different as the stories they have to tell, stories which are silent outside of the men, seemingly muffled by the smoke.

Looking closer, we can see that Riley moves more slowly than Schmidt does; he always takes the longer time to make his shot, to release the tension that Schmidt might feel had he the energy. As it is, Schmidt doesn't feel the tension; he just creates his cloud, occasionally contemplating the possibility of Riley's shot. From in his cloud, he knows. *Just might make it. Just might*, he would think, or *No way that's goin' in, no way in hell*. As far as Schmidt is concerned, he knows, so he doesn't need to expend the energy on tension.

We might feel it. Of course we might like this tension, like trapping ourselves in it only to be released from it seconds later. It may be our reason to watch this game between these two men. We might enjoy that span of time between interpretation and execution, dissolving the concreteness of Riley's attempt to sink the green ball into the far corner pocket into something ethereal, something on another level, perhaps spiritual. We might even suggest that if he doesn't make the shot, it's because he failed at something else, something far more important, and the failure to shoot accurately is some sort of punishment, self-inflicted, by his subconscious, fueled by an anxiety. We might like all this in the game, which we might think otherwise silly.

Whatever we might think, Riley believes only in technique. He is now thinking, *Maybe I should try closing one eye, and leaning like so, and bending my right arm so, and firing so*—It's all in the technique for him. This time his shot misses and as the white ball bounces around aimlessly, hitting other balls, making a light, wooden "tap" sound, he walks backwards towards the wall. He swings his cue up towards his head but stops, thinking about how his hands were positioned on the pool cue.

Schmidt knew that Riley would miss. "Tough luck," he says.

It is a quiet, dead joke that vanishes instantly. He is already reading, interpreting the table. For him, that's what it is all about: interpretation. Most of his time is taken up standing, looking at the table through his smoke, hiding parts of the green felt that might distract him from the crucial areas with his cigarette, his fingers—anything that small close enough to the eyes can block nearly the whole table, and during any one shot, the ball travels over only a small, narrow portion of the board. This is what interests Schmidt.

We don't play this game, and we may not go much for spirituality after all, but we don't think the whole thing silly, because we know that these men aren't silly. We now know of cloud-life, of the perpetually blowing wind, of the dust and noise of the airshow, of these things about New Regensburg that might cause some people to wish occasionally that they were somewhere else, maybe even somewhere like the inside of this bar, by the soft green felt of the pool table, in a world of rumbling wood, smooth, brightly-colored balls and the warm smell of cigarette smoke.

This is what Schmidt may wish, and although we know that he wishes to be elsewhere, neither we nor he is sure if this would be the right place for him, but now that is not one of his concerns. He is looking slowly at the table, one piece at a time, reading positions, constructing lines with his eyes, looking at the pockets for a clue. When he looks long enough at the arrangement of colored balls on the green field, one of the pockets swells just a bit, and a sort of path eventually appears before his eyes, which we cannot see; only he can. It always happens. For him it is a lightening of the felt to a brighter green, almost a yellow. It may as well be a burning white, for he doesn't wait for other possibilities; he just leans over and shoots along the path. Unlike Riley, his technique stays the same. If Schmidt misses, it means that his shot hadn't followed the path, so of course it wouldn't make it. This time it does.

"Nice shot, Bill," says Riley.

Riley doesn't want to be somewhere else; he has been to enough places already, and so far everything about New Regensburg he has come across has made him want to stay here more: the dynamic wind, the amazing airshow, this quiet friendship with Schmidt, this particular bar and billiard table. He hasn't been here

nearly as long as Schmidt has, not even a year yet, so he still feels some sort of thrill of newness to the town, and we won't as yet be able to tell if he ever will feel about it the way Schmidt does. His is a different story, and so far he wants to stay. Yet what he wants at least as much as this is to develop a foolproof shot. Because we don't think him silly, we wish him the best of luck. And even though he takes no stock in luck, and we might not either, but say it as a matter of automatic politeness, he would nonetheless appreciate such a wish from us.

This would be, after all, a sort of love, this giving and receiving of things as solid as smoke, things of little or no real value, with unwavering enthusiasm and honesty. Because of this we perhaps react too strongly when Riley misses. For to him it's just another step closer to the perfect shot: *to find something, one way is to find out where it isn't, remember it, and then look somewhere else*. This is what he believes.

If he had made it, is it because he did everything right?

If he had missed, was it because he did everything wrong, or just one thing?

How could he tell?

He had asked himself these questions at the beginning, when he first learned to play in Las Vegas, and he concluded then that he was going to have to play the silly game for a long time, always looking for clues.

Yes, he thought the game was silly back then, but it was a silly time for him, *a silly time, full of silly people*, he thought, not excluding himself from the description. But he liked technique, and for him, that has always been everything. *You just gotta do everything right*, he thinks. He lights a Marlboro (Schmidt's Winstons always give Riley a headache) and finds himself thinking about the times he didn't do everything right.

One particular time comes to mind, and it had nothing to do with pool. It is the one time he least wants to remember, which we know is a near guarantee that it will be the one most likely to come up. It is the one that sent him on his way from Vegas, that had him wind up in New Regensburg, even more than his attraction to the airshow. That was just an excuse. A picture suggests itself in the

shape of the smoke that comes from his cigarette, which he has brought to his mouth. He looks at the tip and sees a face surrounded by red hair in broad curls in the wavy fibers of smoke coming from the orange light. These curls surround a pair of broad lips painted a red he had only seen on sports cars before he moved to Las Vegas from his hometown, Rabbit, Florida. Also in this picture is a pair of faded blue jeans with a small heart-shaped hole cut out in the mid-thigh, exposing white flesh. Something about those jeans, the way they looked on her that time when she was riding with him in his car, and the way they were both smoking Marlboros from the same pack, made him feel a little crazy, but only inside. He had always preferred to maintain a calm exterior, in spite of everything, and because he had plenty of practice throughout his life, the calmness of his face froze into a stiff, solid outer crust, while the currents of his emotions shifted around just underneath.

He remembers something about that crazy day, the crazy feelings, the way they made him want to just hit the gas and speed out of town with her in those jeans, in that lipstick, with their smoke trapped in his car, and maybe go someplace else where they could sit on the warm hood by the roadside and look back at where they'd been. The city's gray silhouette would be just beginning to light itself up from within as the sun sank into the orange desert, painting the sky, and then he would pretend with her, saying *wouldn't it be fun to go down that road into that big town, they call it Las-V-something, and live it up real big-time for a couple days or so? Wouldn't it, though?* But then she asked him what he was thinking about, because he wasn't saying anything, just imagining it all to himself, with no change of expression on his face, and they were just driving around without a point.

"Not a whole lot," is what he said, "not much."

She sighed and looked ahead. Traffic on the main road was moving slowly, and the warm gray of the early evening was settling outside, matching the color of the air inside Riley's smoke-filled car. It looked like he might have had his windows rolled down, and the smoke had filled the streets of Las Vegas. "I can *walk* home faster from here than it would take you to drive there," she said.

Riley hadn't planned to take her home yet, but then he hadn't

planned anything at all for that evening, so her plan was just as feasible as any he could come up with. “Okay,” he said and pulled over. And with the sound of the threads of her jeans straining against her movement, and the loud groan of the opening of his door, Las Vegas entered his car, dry, dusty, and empty, and he coughed.

That whole time for him was a silly mistake, a time to forget, if he only could. But like Schmidt, he still smokes.

Schmidt has a time he’d rather forget as well, a story he tells people part of sometimes, because he always liked that part, and still does, but that usually reminds him of the rest, the part he doesn’t want to remember. This we also know to be usual, just the way things go. The smoke that comes from his cigarette and out his mouth and nose doesn’t remind him of it at all, though; it just sends him to his cloud, so he is fortunate, for a while. He is just floating in his cloud of smoke.

He has taken his shot and missed. He coughs on the cigarette smoke, and sips some of his drink, which has left a wet circle on the small stool next to the wall. He sits on the stool, and moans imperceptibly as he feels the cold moisture rise up through his jeans. *It figures*, he thinks, almost aloud, but it comes out as a short grunt.

“I’m tryin’ to shoot, d’you mind,” says Riley. The two hardly speak when they play pool. When they do, it is the game that’s in their words.

“Sorry, go ahead, Max,” says Schmidt.

“Got any more problems, or can you keep quiet?”

Schmidt tries to ignore the warming wet spot he is sitting on, and soon he almost can’t feel it. *Maybe it’ll dry before I have to get up again*, he thinks. He knows it is not likely, and he grunts again.

“C’mon, Bill, stop it,” says Riley.

It is now, for some reason, that he remembers the story that he’d rather forget, and he doesn’t have the energy to stop it. It is from his college days at the New Regensburg Community College, about the night when he and his fraternity brothers dressed the Hegel Family up for Halloween. The Family is a dark bronze memorial statue of the founders of New Regensburg that stands in the center

of the intersection of the two main streets, Edge of Town Road and Neckar Street. The statue is ignored for most of the year, except for special occasions, like Halloween. That particular night, Schmidt and his friends, drunk from a party and laughing at their cleverness, staggered out across town to the dimly-lit intersection and borrowed pieces of each other's costumes to dress up the sculpture, which was dark against the lamplight and cold to the touch. They used Schmidt's cape and someone else's white face make-up, scraped off with a finger, to dress Mr. Hegel up as Death. A "Little Sister" sacrificed her whole witch costume to Mrs. Hegel and ran around, laughing, in her witch shoes and full slip, which shone silvery in the moonlight. The three children they turned into small vampires with bits of black clothing and plastic fangs.

It was all funny to Schmidt and his friends for a while, but then the wind picked up and blew swiftly around them and the statue, circling them in a swirling cloud of dust. Then the shadowy forms took on a different spirit with the loose costumes draped over them, slapping around their dark, solid forms that even now reflected small flecks of lamplight from their faces, where the smooth bronze showed through. Schmidt and his friends couldn't stop watching them, as they appeared to waver on their pedestal. They looked as if they were preparing to step down. Schmidt even thought he heard them make some sort of noise, not usual for the wind. He stood and stared, frozen, and had we been there, it would have seemed as if the statues were the people watching Schmidt and his friends.

This is the part of the story that Schmidt really doesn't want to remember: While he had stood there, looking at the darkly-clothed statues, really more at the darkened halo that the flapping cloth made around the solid bronze than at the sculptures themselves, he found himself with his hand in the warm, dry hand of his closest friend. He tried to remember what might have led up to that frightening, yet unexpectedly thrilling instant. He tried to remember the nudging closer, the bumping of arms, even the sound of the breath of his friend, or even his own, but only remembered the wind blowing against his skin, making the hair on his arms stand up, and the blackish, solid, moving ghosts of the ancient Hegel family, and then there they were, in that cloud of dust and mystery. So instead

of trying to remember what it was that brought him to this situation, he remained quiet, and consciously held on, not yet wanting to let go, or even to ask himself how he felt about this. We might guess that he was just drunk, but that would change when we would later see how he had to deal with this for days after, and how, through it all, he lost his closest friend because of it. He was not just drunk; that was only a part of it.

Now he prefers not to remember this time, this feeling, the rough warmth of a man's hand in his, at all. He figures that it was something in the feeling he got when he sat on the wet stool that reminded him of it, sent the memories flooding in, soaking past even this dense cloud he is in. He figures that maybe the two feelings, the wetness and the hand, have something in common, and he lets out another involuntary grunt at the silliness of it all.

"Dammit, Bill." Riley has made his first shot, six in the corner, and was preparing for another.

"Sorry."

These are tense moments for these two men. When one is preparing for a shot, leaning over the table and squinting until his eyes are nearly shut, the other is supposed to be quiet and still. The only movement permitted is the hushed ascent of the smoke from their cigarettes, which gathers around the top of the triangle of light made by the overhead lamp. This cloud of smoke appears to us to threaten to drop on these men, and this threat is similar to the burden being felt now by Riley as he positions himself for a highly complicated shot: two banks and then into the corner pocket with the green ball. He was concerned about the violet ball's position in the path of his target, and he figured out a means to get around it.

Schmidt knows that he's going to miss this. Neither of them are any good at the elaborate stunts. Here, Schmidt thinks that to take a shot like this seriously is silly, a waste of time. But Riley has the time, and he feels that the right technique that can do anything, so he spends as much time thinking about it as usual, and he shoots. When his cue swings up away from the board and nearly hits the lamp, Schmidt says, "Nice try."

"Tough shot," says Riley, "Wrong hand position. Doom in shots like that." It is nothing to him, really. Not much to worry

about. He knows he has a long way to go, and he is willing. He ducks into his smoke and watches as Schmidt walks slowly around the table, holding his thumb in front of his face, squinting one eye shut. He leans against the wall, closes his eyes, and, under the stiff layer of skin, is happy. He can't see any smoke, just Schmidt in his vision. He opens his eyes, and a jet passes by, swinging the lamp just a bit, and making Schmidt's face grow much darker for a moment in the shadow. He hopes that Schmidt makes his shot, because he doesn't want to move right now. He is thinking, *move your guide hand closer to the ball, Bill.*

Schmidt hears the plane and lets out a grunt. He concentrates on the board again and it looks different to him this time. The path that was about to appear has vanished and a new one is forming. The path leads first toward the wall to his left, and from there toward the corner pocket, right where Riley is standing, dragging deep on a Marlboro. He moves his guide hand closer to the ball, and because of the strange reach needed to do this, he pauses and calls up some extra energy. When he slides the cue back along his hand it makes a soft hissing sound. He pauses again, aims down the bright path once more, and releases us.