

My Piper Laurie

by Con Chapman

Of all the foolish expenditures of my misspent youth, the one that in retrospect seems the worst investment of all is—pool. Not the kind with water and chlorine and big foam noodles that kids whack each other with—I mean pocket pool, billiards.



Paul Newman and Piper Laurie: "Nyunga!"

For four years in college, four years in high school, and at least four more again extending back to the time when I could barely reach over the side of the table for a *masse* shot, I played pool, at first for fun, then as a form of masculine emulation. For despite the fact that it's a game played indoors on a table, pool—like smoking cigarettes—comes inevitably to be encrusted with macho mannerisms. There's no violence—that quintessential element of football and boxing; no prospect of accidental death, as is the case with drag racing and mountain climbing; no contest of speed or strength. The physical skill involved is all in the eyes, hands and wrists, the province of pianists, for God's sake.

"Should I have sex? Or did I already?"

So how is it that pool inevitably elicits from those who play the game, whether or not for money, the conduct, gestures and low cunning that animal behaviorists associate with male aggression? Threat posturings, snarling facial expressions, and verbal abuse, both broad and subtle?

I don't know, but I do know—having watched a lot of matches between low and moderately-skilled players—that you can't put pool cues in two amateurs' hands without setting off a certain amount of trash talking and strutting, or for those with an ironic turn of mind, mock behavior of the same sort. Playing *at* pool, not . . . playing pool.



"How ya feelin' Eddie?" "Fast and loose."

This sort of mummery gradually disappears as one ascends the slopes to the summits of the game. And for what should be obvious reasons it is entirely absent when women compete against each other, as I can attest from watching hours of play between members of the Women's Professional Billiards Association (Allison Fischer's my favorite).

Allison Fischer, Brit Chick Billiard Queen: Get your own favorite, I saw her first.

Still, after all those years of play and practice, I've never gotten very good at pool. I'm competent—I've maybe run seven balls in a row once or twice—but still vulnerable in a game against a rank beginner; a physics Ph. D. who figures out the angles to achieve the

best “leave”—position for the next shot. Long shots are my particular weakness; I can nibble around the edges of a rack of balls, but put me behind the cue ball with a long stretch of felt between me and the target ball, and I inevitably—choke. Then up steps a guy with an open bridge (grip of the forward hand on the cue, the sure sign of an amateur) and pounds in the same shot as if he's playing pinball. Me, my resolution is always sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought; I'm the Hamlet of 8-ball.

I don't think it's my vision, although I am nearsighted. There's nothing wrong with my arms, hands or wrists. It's my nerves, my lack of *duende*, that ineffable quality of authenticity associated with flamenco of which Federico Garcia Lorca wrote the first and still definitive study. I get the yips on the greensward of a pool table the way a weekend duffer gets them when he putts.

In this respect I am a poor man's Eddie Felson, the small-time player portrayed by Paul Newman in *The Hustler*, the *Citizen Kane* of pool movies. Eddie has the skills, but he hasn't got the internal strength to succeed until he gets busted down to nothing—and builds himself back up. Ahead of Minnesota Fats by \$18,000 in an all-night game, Eddie orders a bottle of whiskey—J.T.S. Brown—to celebrate well before the night is over. Fats, played by Jackie Gleason, cleans himself up, watches Eddie disintegrate into a self-satisfied puddle of ego, then comes from behind to win.



While Eddie's licking his wounds he meets Sarah Packard, a “college girl” played by Piper Laurie. She walks with a limp, a fact Eddie doesn't notice at first because she's sitting down at a diner table in a bus station. She's alcoholic and writes poetry; her father, who abandoned her when she was young, sends her money. When Eddie's thumbs are broken by a gang of toughs whom he hustles out of small stakes, she cares for him.

Laurie plays the role with just the right mix of vulnerability and skepticism. She looks, to borrow a term from Lester Young, like a startled fawn, but with the haunted air of a Bambi who's just found out the hunters killed her mother.

So maybe that's what I needed, and never got; the alcoholic, poetry-writing, college girl who gets money from her dad and takes me into her apartment when my thumbs are broken. Someone who'd have her flaws—but I'd have mine too! Someone who has a need to fail, like me. A woman with whom I could plot strategies for self-defeat and then, in the final reel, tear them up and throw them away.

But just as we were on the brink of the big time, [SPOILER ALERT] she'd have sex with the George C. Scott character and commit suicide.

It would make for a lousy life, but a great movie.

