

Fat Man in a Blizzard

by Gary V. Powell

I left Milwaukee on January 18. It was Superbowl Sunday. Three feet of snow graced the ground, eighteen below zero--no big deal for January in the upper Midwest. I caught a plane and headed out--I had an important business meeting next morning.

When I arrived in Nashville, it was ten below, six inches of fresh snow were on the ground, and while the airport was open the roads and the city were virtually shut down. I was undeterred. Rather than stand in line (a long line) for the city's only functioning cab, I rented a car. The people at Hertz thought I was crazy. I used my gloves and credit card to clean off the snow and fired up a Taurus. An hour later I careened into the city and arrived at my usual haunt--the old Hermitage Hotel on 6th Street in downtown.

The hotel had been deserted since Friday when the storm hit. Only a skeleton staff remained. I checked in and tried to order room service and watch the game--San Francisco and Joe Montana versus someone. But room service wasn't working. If I wanted dinner I could try my luck downstairs at the restaurant, but the guy at the desk made no guarantees.

I recognized him the moment I walked on the elevator. There he was. Minnesota Fats, short and pudgy, jowly and blond-haired. I recognized him from pool tournaments on Wide World of Sports. I recognized him from photos in his autobiography, *The Bank Shot and other Great Robberies*, read during my pool shooting phase.

I knew this about him already. Fats was a hustler, not a connoisseur of the game. Oh, he could shoot, all right. But he preferred a game for money to a tournament. He preferred the one-pocket, the nine-ball, or the straight pool hustle in a back room to a game under the lights. Straight up, though, he had better luck against the Fast Eddy Feltons of the world than World Champion Wimpy Lassiter, the king of Norfolk when Norfolk was an action

town. He had better luck taking paychecks off small time gamblers in Little Egypt than winning a pot from Willie Mosconi.

In my mind that didn't diminish him. It set him apart.

By the time I met Fats in the flesh, he was old, pushing 80. Like I said, he was more pudgy than fat, squat rather than tall and commanding. Instead of a tux like the tournament players wore in Vegas, he was dressed in some wrinkled, gray work pants and a tattered short-sleeve shirt despite the cold. But he still had that hustler's squint, that nervous tic on his cheek. He sized me up for a pigeon right away.

"You're Minnesota Fats," I said.

He gave me a look--it didn't take no Einstein to figure that out.

I told him I'd read his book. I told him I came from a long line of pool hustlers. I told him I'd like to buy him dinner and listen to his stories.

He rolled his eyes.

But I persisted. Hell, neither of us had the choice of better company. They thawed out New York Strip steaks and served loaded baked potatoes. We ordered beers and a bottle of red wine. Candle light flickered on a table graced by a single yellow rose. No one else was in the place, save a waiter/cook. Outside, snow fell on a silent and deserted southern city that rarely saw snow. The temps dropped to below zero in a place more accustomed to brutal heat.

Midway through the meal, Fats opened up. He told stories about the old days. Stories about how he'd beat all the best players in his day--not in tournaments, but when the money was on the line. He told me how most people played defense when they played one-pocket or straight pool, but he played offense, attacking with three cushion bank shots and cut shots into the side pocket. After all, he'd first learned to play on a true billiards table, then later cut his teeth on snooker, where the balls were smaller and pockets were reduced to the size of pig's eyes.

It was mostly the same bullshit, nearly word for word, he'd written in his book. But I didn't expect anything less. In fact, I'd

have been disappointed by less. That was Fats, a born bullshitter and hustler. That's what he did well. He'd made a career out of it.

After dinner, we walked to the elevator. He was a little shaky. I took his elbow and he didn't resist. He felt soft and flabby. I asked for his autograph but he declined, saying autographs were for suckers. Instead, he gave me an unsigned business card. I've lost it somewhere along the way.

I went back to the Hermitage on business several times after that, but never ran into Fats again.

He died eight years later, nearly to the day, January 19, 1996, at age 83.

His epitaph read: "Beat everyone on earth. Now, St. Peter, rack 'em up."

