

The Celebrity

by Jake Barnes

I sat next to him at the party. He was a little old man in gray slacks and a Hawaiian shirt. He had a big nose and skin as gray and wrinkled as the hide of an elephant. I didn't know who he was. My wife's brother Joey introduced us. Joey said his name was Mr. Blumberg.

Happy-go-lucky Joey was playing host. His father-in-law was indisposed. Daddy managed one of the casinos. His house fronted on a golf course, an oasis of green in a gray wasteland. Joey handed me a glass of ice cubes and Cutty Sark. My wife chatted with old friends. Kids were everywhere, running, shouting, crying, giddy with excitement. There was a tree with a huge pile of presents with fancy wrappings on the floor of the living room.

Mr. Blumberg and I sat side by side on a small couch in the family room. He was watching a football game on TV. When somebody dropped a pass or missed a tackle, he spread his hands and looked up to the ceiling. A fat man wearing a pristine white shirt with a clip-on bow tie laughed and said, "What's the matter, Bobby? You bet on the Browns?" Mr. B. wasn't a conversationalist. He was one of those guys who when he watched TV, he watched TV.

I got up and wandered over to the bar and shot the breeze with Joey. My wife's other brother wasn't there. Maybe he wasn't invited. Both Joey and Phil were dealers, Joey at the Flamingo, Phil at the Stardust. Phil was recently back from a ten year exile in Texas for trying to scam a casino out of a million bucks with phony poker chips. He was lucky he didn't get his fingers broke, Joey said. Joey told me one time how they did it. They put your hand in an open drawer and slammed the drawer shut, he said.

I played the penny game with the kids and instantly became a hero. How you play the game is you palm a coin and pretend to pull it out of somebody's ear or nose or shoe. The little tykes love it. The old ones smell a rat, but they can't figure out how it works. I was using my wizardry to pull a coin from a chubby

redhead's ear when it hit me. Bobby Blumberg. Ice Pick Bobby. Of course! I had read about him in *The Green Felt Jungle*. He was a celebrity of a kind!

Merrrrry Christmas. Later my wife asked me if I had a good time at the party, and I said I did. It was interesting, I said. Different. It seemed funny to me, I said, that there was no snow on the ground.

