

Chapter 27

For about the first time in my career as a gambler – and really, it was a career -- I was worried. Adolf's money wasn't holding. One morning I woke up to realize that I was near broke again – and still owed. I was behind on the rent and I was behind on big men who wanted their money *now*. This affected my eating and my sleeping and I was starting to lose weight. The tooth problems were back and I suffered bouts of migraines. Stress, people told me.

I knew this wasn't any good on the day that blizzard hit. Nothing was moving. Everything was shut down. Schools were closed and even government workers were told not to report. The wind kept howling and the snow kept piling up. There were no cars on the roads. We were told to stay put until it passed, making it sound like a plague.

But I had places to go. I had picked out the entire card at Aqueduct. I was convinced that I had the winner in every race. Why should I let stupid weather stop me? The off-track betting parlors were closed; this I knew. But perhaps Aqueduct was open. There was no chance of that, except a fraction of one percent, enough to get me dressed and ready to go. I phoned the track and there was no answer except for the automation. This was not so unusual, being unable to get through. I kept phoning on the chance that someone would pick up, but nothing came back.

No, I was hoping no one would answer because if someone did pick up, I'd most likely hear that the track was closed – and they wouldn't be nice about it, either, whoever answered. "Are you crazy?" they'd say.

No, I just want to know if you're open.

"You must be nuts, Mister."

Will you be opening late?

"Are you kidding? Have you looked outside?"

Doesn't look so bad.

"What's your name?"

Why?

"Someone ought to report you."

I'm only asking if you're just postponing instead of cancelling.

"You need help, Mister."

Hey, that's rude.

"You need intervention."

I can take care of myself.

"You're not a horseplayer."

Yes I am.

"You're a compulsive gambler. You are sick."

Now that is terribly rude.

"Fuck you, Mister. How's that for rude?"

I thought I heard a report on TV that all racetracks were shut down as well as everything else but turned it off before I could hear the full report. Maybe they were closed but were opening late. There you go! That had happened a few times before. Or maybe they were starting early and would close up later when the jockeys refused to ride because of the weather conditions. This had also happened – and quite a few times in the past. That would be good enough for me because the sure things I had were on the early races. Yes, that would be good enough. Can't bet early and often? Well just bet early.

I could have checked Aqueduct's website, but I didn't want to know. I only wanted to know that there was a chance.

I could not have done all that handicapping for nothing, and another chance as good as this one, where all my choices seemed so certain, might never come round again. If it's your day, it's your day, and it would be criminal to put it to waste. There were days like that, when you could not lose, but you had better show up. This would be

a nasty trick to have all my horses win while I dithered because of some snow.

I got dressed, doubled up on all my clothes, and started for the elevator to take me down to the garage on the corner where my car was parked. Ordinarily I would have taken the Racetrack Special, but no trains or buses were running. The elevator started going down and then stopped between floors. I felt it rattling and I felt and heard the vibrations coming from the howling wind. I pressed buttons going up or down but nothing happened and then I pressed the red button and the bell rang even as I knew there'd be no response because these bells often rang and nobody in the building ever paid much attention.

I tried my cell phone but got no reception. I wasn't worried about being stuck, only about missing the first race. I began pounding on the doors, and then I tried to pry them open, which I did, only to have them shut back again. There was a stool here, still from the days when they were manually operated – this was an old, actually historic apartment complex – and got myself up to the roof of the elevator, and it took some doing but I climbed up into a shaft, climbed further hanging onto the ropes, found a set of doors, and using all my strength, got them to open, and found myself plunged onto the 16th floor.

I ran down the steps. Outside I found it to be worse than what it looked like from the window. The blizzard had come like an invasion. It was nearly impossible to walk against the wind and against the quickly gathering snow. But I walked. Roberto wasn't there at his station in the parking lot, and the arm was up to prevent cars going in or coming out. I found my car and crashed the arm. I would pay for the damage later.

I started driving. The car refused to move. I kept accelerating until I got some movement and started making some headway, even as the wind and snow kept slashing my windshield. I could barely see. The street signs were covered and the roads and sidewalks were one

mountain of snow. But I knew the route automatically, having made this trip so often.

Somehow I got myself onto the Parkway – the only vehicle anywhere in sight – and began to visualize myself at the track, placing my bets, and watching my horses run. I turned on the radio and it was all about the weather and the dangers of the road. Fortunately, the radio said, there were few accidents, so far, because people were smart enough to stay indoors.

“Everything is closed, shut down,” said the announcer.

But he did not mention Aqueduct specifically. I knew the exit to the track and though I could not see clearly and though all exit signs were covered in snow, I knew that I was getting close. I could do no more than about 20 miles an hour, and even then my car kept swerving, but I should be no more than two miles from my destination. I had been driving for two hours and 20 minutes when ordinarily it took me 40 minutes on a good day. But I kept driving with no end in sight.

I wondered if I had turned onto the wrong Parkway. There was nothing but highway straight ahead. There was no place to turn off. All the exits were blocked and all the road signs were indecipherable. My GPS wasn't working because it never worked and it was my fault that I never took it back to the dealer. I was afraid to stop. The car might get stuck and not move again. The car kept skidding but I managed to get some mileage, only I did not know where I was headed.

Now I started to get exhausted. I had to keep hard on the steering wheel or else I'd be off the road and into a ditch. I thought I saw mountains up ahead, but it was blurry for the slashing wind and snow. I had turned the radio off but now I turned it back on and it said that all major highways were closed. So where was I? I was hungry and thirsty and began to drift.

I had fallen asleep for about 10 seconds but it was enough to get me sliding into a ditch, but I pulled back just in time. I drove on. Finally, some life. I saw a man walking across the divider. I could

barely make him out, but it appeared to be someone trudging against the tides of snow. "Hey," I yelled. He kept walking. "Hey, can you hear me?"

I'd have to stop, but I knew that would get me in big trouble. Where was he going? Where could he be going? Then he disappeared.

I checked my cell phone and decided to make some calls. There were moments when it felt like I was on some other planet. I was certainly far from any civilization that I knew. First I tried Jay Garfield but there was no answer, likewise Barbara and Jake Delahouse and Mike Stanton and Stu Mayer and Johnny Castle, friends from my filmmaking business until it dawned on me that I really had no friends, no real friends, none except for Jay and Barbara, and they weren't answering.

No wonder. The radio said that this massive storm had cut out even cell phone service. This had been my nightmare.

God had pulled the plug.

Really? I had no friends? After a lifetime of high school, college, work, play – no friends? No one to count on? Wait. Johnny Castle was indeed a friend and true.

There were others, but I could not think of them at the moment.

After a career in the film business, and there was nobody around? They were there for my awards. Yes, they were there for my awards. Maybe it was my fault. I never went to their parties. I should have gone to their weddings, their birthdays, their funerals, but I never went. I did go to the races, or, I was busy on a film project, or, I had inherited my disdain for festivities of any kind from my father. They could never count on me, so how could I count on them?

But to have no friends, this was an awakening. There certainly was no one from the racetracks or from my other gambling activities that I could call a friend. No, they were gambling buddies and nothing more and when that day's races were over that day's friendship was over. I did *know* many people and many people knew me, but that never counted for much.

This was no time for guilt or feeling sorry for myself. I avoided happy occasions for fear of the evil eye and for the same reason never whooped it up after a win. No, that was not my style and I really did believe that someone up there was watching and taking account and then deciding how to divvy out your rewards against your punishments. Gambling taught me that lesson.

Never show your hand.

No, never mind the guilt. Other people also made mistakes. Other people were also at fault. You can't take all the blame. Who was I fooling as I kept toying with Adolf, and even with Barbara, and even with Katrina? Who was I fooling when I thought one day there'd be That Day at the track? The odds were never in your favor, certainly not at the tables, and not even at the track.

Yes, but some people did win. Some people.

Of all the girls I had dated, how many would remember me, remember me fondly? Oh please! Not that, please.

How much damage had I done and how much damage had been done unto me?

Now we're getting religious all of a sudden? If we believe in God so fervently, why do we pray only at the track and never at church or synagogue? Dad had told me that God awaits each member of the congregation for services, expects them by name. Instead, He expects me at Aqueduct. My house of worship, Aqueduct. My place of prayer, the casinos. That's where You will find me and that is where You can count on me, O Lord. Too late to get religious. I let Him down and now He is getting even...and I never got that part, that part I never got, the punishments that await us if we don't behave according to the wishes of our ministers, priests or rabbis, who are not themselves so holy.

But is that God's entire business – getting even, taking revenge, meting out punishment? What about His 13 Attributes of Divine Mercy?

When does that click in?

Or is everything sinful?

Like Kafka said, first we convict and pronounce sentence and then we hear testimony.

Or like Torquemada said, show me 20 words written by any man and I will find a reason to hang him.

Hah! Johnny Castle had tried to talk me into doing porn. He did it himself just to keep the pot boiling between legit jobs, although porn was plenty legit, big business, and practically everybody was doing it left and right. "Easy money," he said, "and you can do it at home." I laughed. Barbara didn't. She was game, but only for ourselves. No, the trick was to do it for the money, for the 200 million Americans who watched porn more than they watched *Citizen Kane* or *Casablanca*. There was no business like the porn business.

We tried it a few times, and it was a turn on, knowing the camera was going.

There was one split second when, so happy with her appearance and her performance, that she was ready to volunteer to go public. "All women are exhibitionists," she said. She certainly had performed well, and of all the girls, of all the women, of all the movie stars, there was still only Barbara. Then she did what she did.

Did she do it to spite me and my gambling? We had a good marriage, we had a wonderful marriage, so exactly what was so wonderful about the other guy, James Headley, who was not so wonderful anymore, apparently. She saw the light. I saw him once and tried to figure out what was so attractive about him in the first place. He had bushy eyebrows, beady eyes, a week's growth that passed for a beard, altogether this was no Prince Charming, no George Clooney. Obviously he didn't gamble and obviously he could quote Shakespeare. There was no figuring this out – never was when it came to the dangers of attraction.

So now she had enough of him and she wanted to make amends.

Hail started coming down and now it was treacherous and up ahead there was nothing but more road, more hail, more snow, more wind, more road. It occurred to me, gradually, that this could be my end. For some reason, the thought did not trouble me as much as it

should have. After all, I had not done too badly. I had left something behind; I'd say about five, no, six, classic documentaries, and they were still being shown. Then before that there had been the paper journalism, one of which was up for a Pulitzer.

Did I ever make a difference? Yes, my documentary on FGM – *The Sorrow of Female Genital Mutilation* – was still being used by the United Nations to halt that practice.

So the work never dies, and what were you? You were flesh and blood.

I would never get to be the Second Coming of David Lean. It was from Lean that I got the inspiration to go into Film. *Lawrence of Arabia* did it for me, the crisp dialogue, the breathtaking camerawork, namely that cut from the blown out match to the sun-blinding desert; this was my Michelangelo, my Beethoven. In every film I did, I kept David Lean in the back of my mind, imagining him directing me from scene to scene. He had no use for actors. He seldom spoke to them as people. This too I understood, but not to that degree. He was fanatical about getting it right, ruthless to the spirit of the art. Between takes Jack Hawkins had begun horsing around; Lean was furious about the disrespect. I studied *Lawrence*. Each time I learned something new.

Would I get the chance to learn more?

Michael Wilson wrote the first screenplay but Lean was not happy with it because it was too political and unfocused. It had everything about the Revolt in the Desert and that was the problem; it had everything but a center, a hero. Lean hired Robert Bolt. He instructed Bolt to zero in on one man, Lawrence, and have the universe revolve around Lawrence, and let the rest fall into place – and it sure did.

From this I learned to keep my documentaries pointed to a hero, man or woman. There was always one person who made the difference. I was never taken by ensemble casting, even before I was introduced to Lean. Too much going on. As soon as you got interested in one character, another character showed up – and a movie is about two (or one) movie stars.

So I thought of David Lean to keep my mind from *drifting*.

Maybe I should just stop the car. It wasn't going any place anyway. So maybe I should just stop the car and forget everything and let whatever happens happen. This thought gave me comfort. Imagine, no more debts – and that alone gave me comfort. No more debts, no more threats, no more schedules to keep, no more people to please, no more enemies to make; not such a bad deal after all. A few people would miss me.

I was sure to make the news. I had a name. I could have been a contender, and I was. I didn't do all that bad. I could just wait here in the car and let it come, or, if I was really serious, I could get out, walk about half a mile, and freeze to death. No, that would be suicide, and a sin. If I just sat here it wouldn't be my fault. That would make it a pure accident.

But then, on second thought, I would miss the Kentucky Derby!

I'd miss the sight of a naked woman. Better yet, a woman getting undressed, slowly, for you, just for you, and giving you that look.

Barbara had finally learned to masturbate (as if she didn't know it all along) and calling me into the bathroom to catch her unawares, she'd tarry in there to make sure I heard her heavy breathing, and that was quite sensational. But that was nothing to be thinking about at this time. Someone was watching and taking notes and questions would be asked, and besides, like the man said, sex is nothing. Temptation is everything.

Well, that depends.

What did she want? What does woman want? King David had sinned a great sin. He had coveted a married woman, Bathsheba. He sent her husband out to the heat of the heaviest fighting so that he would never return, and so it was. King David then married Bathsheba and for that sin, their first son immediately died. David prayed for forgiveness. He wrote Psalms for forgiveness. David was the father of forgiveness. So next came Solomon, later to be King Solomon, the wisest ruler of them all – and all from the coupling of David and Bathsheba.

Therefore sin, retribution, atonement, forgiveness, the four true elements of an examined life.

What was up there besides nothing? Were those really mountains or a mirage? The car began spinning out of control and with great effort I set it right and kept on going. Through it all the sun had been shining, even blazing, and now it was dusk, and for sure all the races were over, as if I didn't know, all along, that the track was closed. I knew it all along but I still had to go. Such was the urge. Such was the disease? Barbara would again call it the Anatomy of a Compulsive Gambler.

She would probably do a radio show on the topic.

Love me just one more day, Katrina had said. Just one more day. Oh how they needed to be loved!

But such was this craving of mine. I had to go. I had the horses picked out and they could not do this to me.

I certainly was not on the road to Aqueduct, not after all this time. Now banks of snow started coming my way and my car began to lurch, fighting for traction. I steered this way and that but kept slipping and sliding yet somehow kept moving forward, up, up, it seemed, toward those mountain ranges. There were no mountains on the Parkway.

My phone buzzed and it was Barbara, and it got to be like this...HELLO?...HELLO?...HELLO?

But other than that, no reception, and then Jay phoned, and it was the same thing all over again.

Even over dead phones I said that I should be on the Belt Parkway. That is what I told 911 and was told it was impossible to get me out.

What was I doing there anyway?

Now the car refused to move and it even quit idling. The engine was out. I kept trying to start it up again but it was no use. The heater conked out. Now it was freezing. I hadn't brought enough clothes, or food, or even my medicines. I got out and like an idiot checked under the hood, as if I knew what I was doing. I knew nothing mechanical, except for the cameras.

I couldn't even fix a flat tire. My gawd – how pampered and spoiled we are in the big cities, especially Manhattan. Everything is there for us just for the asking.

I started to tinker under the hood, tightening bolts and whatever else might be loose, but my fingers soon froze up and I ran back inside the car, and now it was dark, and here was the moon and stars, and still the wind howling, and still the snow and hail lashing. I had a hundred or so numbers programmed in my iPhone and I tried them all, but nothing came back.

I could not even tell people where I was if they asked me, though I should be, yes should be on Belt Parkway, but nothing here resembled Belt Parkway.

I got angry. I thought of all the spitefulness, double-dealing and double-crossing I'd endured. Jake Emery had a decision to make and he chose the other guy, the other director, and Jake had been Best Man at my wedding and, at his urging, we had made plans to go partners. We were going to astonish the world with our films, first documentaries and then features, big feature films, and we even had some backing lined up, and then he made the decision to cut me under.

He never phoned to explain, certainly never to apologize. No, he found a better deal. He simply found a better deal.

The deal fell apart.

If I got out of all this, would I return to forgive or to get even? No, I would get even, and Jake was not the only one. There were scores of them.

I started pounding the steering wheel and heard myself yelling and I got furious gazing up ahead at all that absolute nothingness. There was nothing but a terrible whiteness that covered the earth, around and around, top to bottom, and there were no sounds except for the punishing wind and the slashing hail. I tried again and *eureka*[!] the car started.

I pushed on ahead, trusting that somewhere up ahead there would be a form of life. There must be.

I turned the radio back on, but voices annoyed me, music annoyed me. I listened for the news, and it was mostly the weather, how awful it was, and that it could take weeks to recover. The cost could run into the billions. Limbs and even trees had crashed into electrical systems and cars and even homes had been crushed. The governor was already demanding disaster relief.

This was the worst storm of the century.

The entire state was shut down and in Washington, D.C., the federal government was shut down, here in the most powerful nation on earth, yes, here, even here all that can happen, all was helpless and futile when God pulled the plug. Wires and batteries held us together and we thought that was enough, but to Nature that was lipstick and chewing gum.

One snowfall – and we were out of luck and out of business.

One report had it that members of Congress and the Supreme Court had fled their buildings and were scattered and on the run throughout the streets of the capital trying to find shelter. These, along with the President, the President of the United States, were the most powerful men and women on earth – and all of it was nothing but vanity. One snowfall and they were licked. What advice, what help could they give when they themselves were destitute?

God gazed down upon the earth and said, so you have built for yourselves another tower, as in Babel – well, now see how you run.

There was more talk on the radio now about evacuations wherever traffic would allow and where the storm had not yet come rushing in. The highways were congested with panicked citizens fleeing their homes. Police spokesmen were saying they'd never seen anything like this. "Armageddon" people kept saying. Airports were closed in five states. Passengers were stranded.

"If you were fool enough to hit the road, forget about getting help," said the announcer.

He only lacked my name.

"Firefighters, police and the National Guard are doing the best they can, but they have their hands full."

“You have to be insane to take the chance,” said his partner.

“But there’s always a few knuckleheads out there.”

“Yes, and they put responders at risk.”

“Right, that’s the height of selfishness.”

I turned off the radio and stopped the car. What was the use driving? Best bet would be to sit it out, and wait till it blew over.

I turned the radio back on.

The weather person was speaking: “There’s another storm looming right behind this one.”

One wasn’t enough.

A collision of weather patterns, said the weather person.

“The perfect storm?” asked the announcer.

“Something like it,” she said.

What was that up ahead – a tornado? Or was that just snow spinning and twirling? No, it was a tornado. The radio had said to watch out for them. Tornados had been spotted throughout the eastern part of the state. I watched this incredible Biblical sight, lightning whirling in a bottle; no, the finger of God. I immediately thought of the movie *Out of Africa*: “God is coming.”

I drove on. I decided against waiting it out. There had to be an end to this somewhere. I thought I saw a turn-off. I thought I saw an exit sign and then an exit. I gunned the engine but that made it worse, so I coasted. I got to where there was indeed an exit and the semblance of a clearing right at the ramp. I angled right, and pushed into it but the snow was packed too tight and each time it cleared the wind packed in more snow, like setting a trap.

Each time I made for it, more snow came piling on. I got out of the car. I started kicking the mounds of snow to create a clearing, and when I thought I had a clearing I ran back to the car and gunned for it again – and again the clearing packed up. Man against Nature? Not a good bet.

This was not going to work, but here I was going to stay. Here I would wait it out. But how long would it take?

By this time I was nearly too exhausted to care. I must have fallen asleep.

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