

The Shark

Part One

I walked in to the bar like Clint Eastwood, in 'A Fistful Of Dollars'. I signed the member's book, 'Hurricane'. I didn't have any spurs on my boots or they would have chinked and clinked as I walked on the wooden floor. I didn't have a broad brimmed hat to pull over my eyes, but imagined I was wearing one, and I creased up my eyes as I took in the scene in front of me. There were two full sized snooker tables and five pool tables. A group of young cowboys were working on balancing one of the snooker tables. That was good to see; they knew how important it is to have properly set up tables when I, and outlaws like me, wander in for a showdown.

(My cowboy fantasy was getting out of hand. Actually, I was in downtown Doha, and this new snooker club was being put together for the tourist trade.)

I walked over to one of the pool tables and snatched up a cue from the rack, as the group of cowboys followed me with their eyes, frozen in the middle of their work. I noticed the baize of the pool table had just been ironed, a good sign. Taking the white ball, I decided to see how good they were and slowly ran the cue through my fingers. The white was sent down the length of the table about three inches away from, and parallel with, the side cushion. The idea was that I had to know if the table was perfectly balanced. The white ball shouldn't veer either left or right, but run in a smooth line, straight as a bullet from a rifle. I could accept a minimal deviation when playing against the nap of the cloth. This table was perfect. I took a coin from my pocket and smashed the silence, slamming it down on the table edge. The cowboys were jumped into awareness and stood awkwardly, edgy now, that I had laid down a challenge.

The head honcho, I had spotted him immediately, was wearing a snooker glove. They are more for fashion than competition. They are leather, have two fingers, for the thumb and forefinger, and the rest of the glove is a strap that winds around the wrist. The head honcho raised an eyebrow and sent a young greenhorn over to challenge me. The rest of them stood nervously, mentally reaching for invisible cues.

I waved a casual hand to let him know he could break off, and he chalked his cue; the scraping of it was the only sound in the place. Just before he went down for the shot, I told him we would play English pub rules Eight Ball. There are four or five different international sets of rules for Eight Ball, and I didn't want to have to wipe him out just because he got the rules wrong. It was like a lamb to the slaughter as I picked him off easily and sent him packing back to the others.

The main man, touched the shoulder of another of his posse, and he stepped forward. I liked his stance, and cueing action, but still he was no match for me. And then, at high noon, the head honcho stepped up, and eye to eye with me, placed his

money on the table. He stretched his glove and the leather creaked. He flipped the coin. He won the toss, and that was all he was going to win. The first game went to the wire but I beat him on the black. It was very close. He slammed another coin in and said, 'another'. I was just ready to blow his head off. He hadn't asked for another game, but demanded.

I know you are dying to ask why I signed the book 'Hurricane'. Well, I'll tell you. I can tell the quality of a player from his first or second shot. Most people play too hard and cannon the ball around the table. Pool is best played slowly. What I do is to set up my balls by playing quite gently and when I am ready, I smash the balls in, full force. The opponent thinks he has me figured by watching my early shots, gentle and measured. Then I wake him up by smashing the balls in, one after another, at a pace no-one can match. Hence, the Hurricane. By the time he realises it, the game is over and he bites the dust! That's what I did this time and before he could fire a second shot, I had him plastered all over the room. It was all over; I had beaten the natives hands down. I slid the cue back into the rack and whispered menacingly, 'later', and then walked in steady steps to the exit.

I don't know why, but outside in the sunny day, the gunslinger persona disappeared and once again I was a middle aged, ordinary person, just enjoying the scenery. Across the road there was a tourist café, and so I relaxed there with a bottle of beer and some savoury snacks. This was just about the perfect place to site a café. The building itself was made of wood and looked like a cricket pavilion. The tables and chairs were arranged on a patch of well cared for lawn. Best of all though, was that all this was only a five minute walk from my apartment.

Part Two

My meteoritic rise to the upper echelons of pool started just like anyone else's rise; with a local team, playing in a local league. I played for the Town Hall pub team, and since there were so many good players, I was allowed to join the B team. The first team were a really serious bunch of people who I disliked immensely. They were old school, and played pool like snooker; serious, concentrated and unlike good snooker, they were boring. In the B team, we were lively, hungry and fought with everything we had, to win. It wasn't long before I was elevated to the B team captaincy. All our other good players were elevated to the A team, as the original A team members became depleted. I just bit my lip and tried my best in the lower league. It was only a matter of time, though. The B team was, to put it quite frankly, rubbish!

In our league, a match consisted of seven games; two singles first, then a double, then two singles again, then a double and finally one singles game. I have never been able to play like other people and so excluded myself from the doubles. You see doubles players have to have an understanding and the ability to play a complementary game. I was a loner in the game and played in a different way. The advantage of only playing one game though, was that I could concentrate on the

responsibilities of captaincy. To be honest, I am not captain material because of my oddball attitude to the game as a whole.

Before I get on with another tale, I should tell you about which games are important and why. In a seven game team match the first game is very important because you want to get off to a good start. So, the first player has to be a steady Eddie, someone who is reliable and fairly serious. Captains often play this game, but I never did when I was captain. I always played the fourth game because that is pivotal. You can have four options by game four; you can be three nil ahead, two one up, two one down, or three nil down. So you can see how pivotal the fourth game is. That was when I used to play myself. The final game of the seven is also important if the score is three all. In that case, the captain will pick the steadiest of players and the most sober because by that time we would be all a bit gone! If the game is already won, I would play one of the more promising second string players, because he needed the practice and the big time experience.

After captaining the B team to no success at all, I was promoted to the A team and my career shot off, as I became the regular fourth game player. I was never captain or vice captain, and I think that helped me to play better. The captain, Nigel, was excellent and everything a captain should be; sober, logical and focussed. The vice captain was called Martin, a good friend of mine, who unfortunately is now dead after cancer beat him. After a few years in the team, I went solo.

Part Three

There are three bars, as far as I know, called Glassy Junction, in the world. One is in a pub in Southall near London, and the other two, owned by the same person, are in the Panjab, in India. I went to the one in Jalandhar, feeling a bit like Lee Van Cleef, the other main actor in the Spaghetti Westerns I love so much. He is not like the Clint Eastwood character; instead he is cool, highly technical and methodical. I went down the stairs to the bar and ordered two fingers of red eye. To you teetotallers out there that's a very large whisky. I scanned the room with my cool piercing eyes, measuring the worth of each of the players. You can tell by their stance, how they use their cue and their playing strategy. There were a few that would make it worthwhile, so I sauntered over and put my money down. Winner, I said. They tried to ignore me but I could tell the tension was beginning to build. A stranger always adds something to a place. After another drink, I ordered a beer chaser, a bottle of Kingfisher strong.

Their game ended and I was on, against a heavy set guy you wouldn't want to meet on a dark night. He had had a few beers, I could tell. He was very good, so I had to employ my psychological techniques. One easy way to distract the opponent is to stand at the edge of the player's sightline. Everything is absolutely still; the white ball, the object ball and the player. Before he shoots, as he brings his cue back I keep my feet planted firmly but move my torso more into his sightline, and so introduce a bit of uncertainty into his view. It sometimes works. This guy was a sucker for it and I won the first few games easily.

The other dead give away, is to concentrate on the opponent's shoulders. As he gets more exasperated at losing, his shoulders and neck will tighten. If you can see that, you know you will beat him. Stiffened neck and shoulder muscles prevent him from playing his cue smoothly and he will start jabbing more with the cue. Once he is off his natural game you can take him to bits.

Let me tell you a true story about the word Glassy. It is pronounced in Panjabi as glasse. It means a glass of spirits, (and glass means a pint of beer). Well, my father told me a story of a friend of his who didn't speak much English. He saw a nice woman in a pub and thought he would chat her up. He said to her; 'you go, me go, glass go'. He was trying to say that he wanted to get them both a drink. She told him 'but I don't want to go to Glasgow'. It was brilliant, because he didn't understand any more English and she was adamant that she didn't want to go with him, a complete stranger, 200 miles to another city.

Anyway, back to the game. The man I was playing put down a bundle of one hundred rupee notes. Now, I don't like playing for big money, but I had been drinking and he was getting worse at his game. Then he went to the bar and got me a whisky the size of about a quarter of a bottle's worth. It was neat. Now he was playing my music! So I did the same and gave him a drink the same size. The whole place went quiet. We stood nose to nose and I raised an eyebrow to indicate that we should drink it down in one go. He knew then that he had already lost. He put the drink down and, picking up the money slid away like a snake in the grass. Before he got to the stairs to leave, he took one look back at me. I raised the glass and emptied it in one. Then I let the glass drop and break on the floor. He left, and before I could be challenged about breaking glasses, I put a note in the hand of the barman, and he cheered up immediately. I had a few beers to sober me up a bit and to let the other guy get out of the area, and then casually left with a wink to the bar tender.

Part Four

I've been to Thailand a few times, and a few years ago played some good stuff in Pattaya. The Thais love their pool and in most bars there are three or more pool tables laid out and ready. I was with a woman from Japan, who was also working there on a contract, like I was. She was very serious and, to be honest, a bit boring. Anyway, we had some time off from our work and hired a taxi to show us some sites. Tsushima, I think her name was, wanted to go for a massage and the taxi driver took us to a huge place, the size of a theatre. There were coach loads of people arriving and inside there were masses of young women waiting for customers. It was like a massage supermarket. She booked in for a two hour session, the most expensive one on offer. She asked me what I was going to do for all that time but I told her not to feel guilty; I had other things on my mind.

The taxi driver had told me about a bar just around the corner and I wandered over there, whilst the driver said he would be back in about an hour. Pattaya is the favourite destination for middle aged, white (usually British), single men because

there are beautiful young ladies everywhere. I soon learned that even if you just looked at a girl, she would come and sit by you. None of this; how much for that or this – they didn't even ask you to buy them a drink. And with all those pool tables, I realised this must be paradise.

I got a drink, Singha beer. The only problem with the beer is that it comes in small tins and so you have to drink lots of them. I went to a pool table and before I could pick up the white ball, a very pretty young lady, about twenty or so, came up and smiled at me. I smiled back and set the table up. I could hardly concentrate on the game. She was dressed in a tee shirt, very short shorts, and flip flops. After each shot I took, I would sit down on a high stool with my drink and then she would take her shot. She was very good at pool and had an uncanny ability of leaving the white ball near my stool. She would come up, bend down for her shot and nestle her bottom right in front of me. She wasn't wearing anything underneath her tee shirt and more than once I inadvertently, (deliberately), caught a glimpse of her beautiful pert breasts. She was playing me like I had never been played before, and I'm not talking about the pool. Anyway, one thing led to another.

Soon, Tsushima's massage time was up and I had promised her that I would be there when she came out. I left my Thai girl, and had been greatly pleased with my cue action. Tsushima said that her massage was the best she had ever had and then she asked me how I had filled my time. I said, in a rehearsed and slightly depressed tone, that I had just loitered about. She felt guilty and took me for a very nice Thai meal and told me I was very patient and understanding. I really enjoyed that day.

Part Five

Some people might think
 It's a bit daft
 To go all the way to
 The Himalayas
 Just to play snooker.
 But the table in the
 Hotel was brilliant,
 And in any case
 I could see the
 Mountains out of the window.

This was a poem I wrote about my snooker playing escapades in the Himalayas. Most people would go to the Himalayas for the mountains and the views, and so it was with me. I love the Himalayas and go there every time I am in India. I stayed in the Dauladhar Hotel, which is a Himachal Pradesh Tourism Board hotel, in Dharamsala. After booking in, and offloading my suitcase, I was on the way to the restaurant when I saw the only thing more beautiful than a mountain range or a scantily clad young lady; a full sized snooker table. There was a door left ajar, otherwise I might not have spotted it. I booked some time on it and after my meal, went to play. Can

you imagine; a snooker table, probably from the days of the Raj, and through the windows I could see the huge mountain ranges of the Himalayas? If Thailand was paradise, there must be more than one kind of paradise!

Later, I found someone to play against, a jolly Indian of limited skill. But this wasn't a competition; it was simply relaxing. In between shots we exchanged information about where we were from and that kind of stuff.

I returned to the hotel the next time I was in the region but was disappointed. I had been dreaming for all of the ten hours of driving there from the Panjab, of playing all evening. The receptionist told me that the table had been transferred to McLeod Ganj, to their sister hotel. That is only about a forty five minute drive, around steep curving roads with precipices falling hundreds of metres to the valley below. So I cancelled my booking and went there. The decision was easy.

After that, I met someone who became a sort of friend, and who took me to a bar, far out in the mountains. There was a restaurant and a few shabby huts, besides the bar. Otherwise there was nothing else but wilderness and mountains. It was so lovely. Inside, we got some drinks and then walked into an adjoining room where there was the most unkempt pool table I have ever seen. It wasn't balanced; the baize was torn and it had never been ironed. Even the balls looked sad. But, like the wandering cowboy who can treat a shot man's leg, I made the most of it and lovingly played the game on the table that time had forgotten. In this place I was no longer the 'Hurricane', or Clint Eastwood. I was an old man in a worn flimsy hat rocking in an old chair on the veranda of a log house, reminiscing how the buffalo had passed this way many years ago, in their tens of thousands. And now they were all dead, killed in the name of progress. This old man got his pleasures these days by spitting his used tobacco into a tin spittoon, instead of shooting for real. I fancied that his name was something like grandpa Abe....

Part Six

There are three levels of pool players; beginners or casual players, mid range, and advanced. You can tell the beginner because he or she will play just to pot one ball, and when the ball goes down, accidentally, or purposely, the beginner then looks to see which ball to try next. The mid range player thinks about the next shot as well as the current one. He or she will think about where the white ball should end up so that the next ball will be easier to pot. The advanced player looks at the table as a whole and plans the potting order of at least the first four balls, if not all seven. It may not go to plan but this global view, besides being very difficult to perfect, leads to the player being one with the table.

The girl from Fiji was definitely in the beginners group. She wasn't, in fact, from Fiji, but I called her that for two reasons. One was that she is a very shy and beautiful young lady and wouldn't want me to reveal her name in a casual way. The other reason is that when we played in Glastonbury, she wore a lovely flowery skirt that

reminded me of the South Seas. She was very misleading in her style of playing. When I take on someone, I look at their stance and cue action. The girl from Fiji had an excellent stance and she moulded herself into the cue in a very connected way. On first glance I would have said she was a very good player. However, she couldn't hit a ball if her life depended on it. She was so funny!

I loved playing against the girl from Fiji because it allowed me to be completely relaxed in the knowledge that she would never beat me unless I accidentally potted the black at the wrong time. I used to pot all my balls and then offer to swap with her so that she only needed the black and I would inherit all seven of her balls. That only worked a few times and then she started insisting that she would play her own balls regardless. So when I got to the black ball, I used to try to pot it by bouncing off at least one cushion, effectively doubling it across the table, or hitting more than one cushion. I still won. What I enjoyed the most of all, was her concentration when trying for a ball. She really looked like her life depended on it, and I must say, it made her look even more beautiful than usual. It might have been something to do with the combination of the loves of my life being in the same place at the same time; beer, pool tables, and girls. I fell in love with her, and she was still as poor at pool, even then. Strange that, isn't it?

Part Seven

Two games which invoke special memories:

The funniest pool game I ever played was in the Yorkshire Dales. My intrepid friend, Graham, and I, went out into the wilderness for a few days. We were the worse for drinking one day and decided to set up camp. After that, we went into a pub which was very handily placed. There was a pool table. It was unusual to find one in that kind of pub; usually people went to eat, as well as drink in country pubs, and the space used up by a pool table could be better used to place more dining tables. Anyway, I declared that we should play pool, and although Graham isn't a pool player, he agreed. We started playing and kept drinking, and I was very poor, because I could hardly see the table, but still I was much better than my friend. Then, the funny incident happened. It was Graham's turn and he was stretching across the table for his shot. I thought he was taking a long time, as I stood there rocking slightly from side to side. After what seemed like an unreasonable time I said to him, come on then, take your shot. He didn't move. It took me a while to realise that he had fallen asleep on the pool table! Unbelievable!

The other special incident was when I was playing someone locally. I was on fire and he had no chance. It was first to ten games, and I was up seven to nil. Then, and no-one knows how these things happen, he had a come back. He won the next game and the next and so on, until it was level at seven all. He was delirious with joy and was even taunting me. Then he went ahead eight to seven. I was on the ropes like a boxer just waiting for the next punch. From somewhere, I gained my confidence again and managed to pull it back to eight all. Then I gritted my teeth and everything

else that can be gritted, and eventually won, ten games to eight. It was an incredible match, and one I will never forget, although I have seen it happen to others. There is no explaining how a mediocre player can suddenly turn a match around. I have seen this in other sports as well. In a game of darts there was a player who was just short of being an England national team member. Once, he got to the stage where his fingers locked and he couldn't release the dart at all! Each time he swung his arm, the fingers would lock. He was very upset, but these things are usually temporary and related to stress or a big moment in a game.

Part Eight

The world of pool can be very dodgy and sometimes dangerous. That happens when players go for the big money games. I have heard more than once of knife fights and assaults after games have finished. Losers can simply mug the winners on their way out. And for that reason, some players are accompanied by their own bodyguards. I never went in for anything like that although the possibilities of playing in these big money games was offered to me more than once. Instead I remember the closest I got to trouble was also one of my funniest experiences.

In the local league, when I was still the captain of the B team, we were due to play away, at a very dodgy pub in an area I otherwise wouldn't go to. Our league was on Tuesday evenings, alternately playing home and then away. One of my friends came along on that particular night. He is a bit accident prone. We ordered drinks, and then I inspected the table to make sure it was in good condition. During the rest of the week, anyone can play there, but on match nights only the teams were allowed to play. Surprisingly, the table was in excellent condition; it looked new. The baize was well ironed and the balls ran true. We sat down and enjoyed the atmosphere. When the home team arrived, they looked a bit thuggish, but we knew the business was going to be on the table, not anywhere else. The time came and we captains shook hands and the game started.

I had a feeling that this pub was proud of their new table, and I could understand why. It was in a deprived area and one way of showing people of their progress was to have new things. They wanted to be seen to be turning a corner and becoming more respectable. The home team players performed well and, I think, even better than usual because of their pride in having a new table. Anyway, my friend went to the bar and got a packet of dry roasted peanuts. He returned and sat down, at the same time pulling open the packet. But they are not easy to open, to seal in the freshness, no doubt. As one of the home team players was lining up for a shot, my friend got up to get a better grip on his packet of peanuts and pulled as hard as he could. The pack exploded and the peanuts were sprayed all over the new table, with some of the mischievous ones even going down the pockets. There was a deadly silence. The player who was lining up was frozen in mid shot. Slowly, all eyes turned to my friend. This was worse than sacrilege. I can't remember how, but our team managed to recover the situation and even saved the worthless life of my friend. It was a cool, silently aggressive game after that, and without any friendliness. My

friend knew he had done wrong, but not being a pool player was not overly concerned. In the end, we won, and then hightailed it out of the pub as quickly as we could, taking the few peanuts that were left, with us.

Part Nine

All good things come to an end and mine did too. Marriages, children, mortgages and work, all contributed to my transformation from the Hurricane, to a tropical storm, to a squally shower, to a rainy day, and finally to a storm in a teacup. I still play when I can, and although opponents probably see the middle aged, beer bellied, mediocre has-been, I still feel the Hurricane rising inside me, and for the brief minutes here and there, I am still tearing opponents to shreds and splattering them all over the room. And, age makes us more proficient in some things; I think my Clint Eastwood persona is better now than it used to be. I can afford a wide brimmed hat and even a chewed cigar!