

POOL

THE STORY

He just showed up at Big Jack's Billiard Parlor one day and looked around. In his hand he carried two cases. One was a pool cue case, the other one looked like a doctor's medical bag. The pool cue case didn't look like the regular case that most pool players used, it was shorter and fatter. The designer case was made of worn alligator hide and had a gold handle and the number "6", engraved on it, where the initials would be normally.

There was a reason for this; his cue had been custom made to fit into three pieces. Not the usual two parts, I was to find out later.

"I'd like some balls please" he said with a faint smile, as he approached the bar. I turned around to get the balls as he walked a few steps to the side of the counter.

He looked around, at the "Wall of Fame" that graced the wall behind the bar, showing signs of recognition of the people in the black and white photos. His eyes drifted from one to the other as he reflected on them.

He focused on a faded 8+10 glossy picture of Joe Louis. The "Brown Bomber" was in his classic boxing stance, baby face and all, but, a killer to the bone. It was everybody's favorite picture and was placed in the top spot on the wall. Everybody knew that Joe Louis was America's favorite hero, especially after he had knocked out German Heavyweight Max Schemlin taking his belt. Joe Louis became the undisputed Heavyweight Champion of the World.

His eyes moved next to the one of Sugar Ray Robinson, standing arm in arm with a pretty lady. Sugar Ray always looked like he just stepped out of a French fashion magazine. Leaning on the hood of a pink and black Cadillac with his beautiful lady by his side, the "Sugar man" was all smiles. One would never know that he was, "Pound for pound" the greatest fighter of his generation.

A young Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, with his "Hot Five", at the swank club Delisa, sat next to the "Sugar Ray." He was in the Chicago night spot hugging Ella, the "First Lady of Song." Louie was in typical form with his trademark "Satchel mouth" smile. His wife Lil held down the piano chair in his jazz group.

There was a picture of Charlie “Yardbird” Parker standing in front of a Bebop group. Dizzy Gillespie stood next to “Bird” “fat mouthing” with the bassist Billy Taylor jr. Bird was blowing like there was no tomorrow.

These were just a few of the pictures that he recognized. Nat “King” Cole and his quartet, John Collins on guitar, Lee Young on drums. Nat was looking just like a singer of royalty.

An ad for Murray’s hair pomade, and a picture of T-Bone Walker, with his flashy Gibson guitar and his gold tooth smile made the wall. His process was “shining like new money.” It was next to the one of Nat “king” Cole.

The three most recognizable Negro entertainers, T. Bone, Nat and Sugar Ray “had the waves for you baby” all the work of Jheri Jackson, famed hair stylist of the stars.

A picture of Madame C.J. Walker, advertising her hair products, hung next to the one of a poster, advertising the coming revival dates of Daddy Grace at his spiritual temple.

An early B.B. King announcing his appearance at the Big Ten Ballroom, doing his hit, “Woke up This Morning” along with Guitar Slim doing his hit, “The Thangs I used to do” gave ample notice of the upcoming event.

Sister Rosetta Thorpe, her guitar slung low, with the WKTL Chicago logo on the RCA microphone made the wall.

Billie “lady Day” Holiday had autographed her photo, the ever present orchid, was nearly as big as her half smile. She was loaded and swinging, “I can’t give you anything but love.” Duke Ellington, Billy Eckstine and Count Basie’s bands were grouped together, at the top of the bar, The “Wall of Fame” was a veritable “Who’s Who” of black entertainment.

We finally made direct eye contact, when he came back to the moment. He said “Thanks”, and I handed him the box of balls. He looked sheepishly when he realized that I had been standing there with the box in my hands for a few seconds.

He took the balls and headed to the back three tables, bypassing the first table.

“I wondered why, usually every body wants to play on the first table.” I thought, as I watched him put his case down on the middle table.

Then he began to examine the green felt covers. They were all clean and well brushed. This is something I did every morning, first thing. He examined the table in a strange way. First, he walked slowly around the table dragging his fingers along the rails, and on to the green felt itself. He stopped near the corner pocket, and went back up the side pocket. Then he touched the same area, again. He felt something, went to the last table, and did the same thing. He settled on the last table. It was back a ways but, not too far back. This way I could watch him play, and see what kind of game he had.

I watched his ritual with interest. This was the first time I had ever seen this kind of scrutiny. I also noticed how softly he touched the green felt; he treated the table with respect, like it was something special. He was at home on the pool table and I knew it, right from the start.

“Not much to do midday in this place anyway, I’ll check out his game, maybe play the jukebox, make small talk, if he’s the talkative kind.”

This was CeCe’s introduction to the man who would change her life forever.

Carolynn Jones was the “Recreational Manager” of the billiards parlor, or, so it had been advertised, in the Black Eagle Newspaper. The position title had been the creative literary genius of the papers’ owner and publisher Goodland Edwards III. His grandfather had founded the small paper, on “Black Wall Street”, around the turn of the century. It had grown to be a respectable source of news for the all-black community, that was rebuilt after the race riot of ’21.

“He’s no ordinary player,” she thought, as he unlocked his case, with a key he kept on a gold chain he took from his wallet. She went to ask if he wanted something to drink, and looked inside the case, as she got near. The case was lined on one side with velvet, and on the other with a mink-looking fur, and four pieces, of what were his cue shafts.

His weapon of choice was “kept better than most women”, thought “CeCe” as she watched him take a soft piece of cloth from his bag and wipe the dust off the section. He then carefully screwed in one section, looked down the shaft, and then slowly screwed in the second part. He rolled the cue stick delicately across the table, making sure it was straight. He did so with ease and without fanfare, adding to the quiet of this summer day.

All the daytime activities had dried up after Carolina Slim died. When he “moved on”, as the old men said, Big Jack had to come back and clean up after Carolina made his transition. Jack owned Big Jacks’ Billiard Parlor, the name on the window told you so. His big black ‘hog’ parked out front, was evidence of the proprietorship too, just in case someone didn’t know “what time it was.”

She had answered the ad in the newspaper almost two months ago. Carolina Slim had been in charge of the pool hall for ten years, until he got sick. He had a side “haim”, and all the hot things in town, filtered down through the pool hall when he was “on his game.” He bought and sold clothes, food stamps, home appliances, computers, Cds, Driver’s licenses, pink slips, green cards and just about anything that any one of the boosters could steal and bring in, to get a few bucks. They had to keep their “Jones” cooled out. Jade East, Aramis, Polo, and all the other exotic perfumes and colognes advertised on television and in the fashion books, could be found at Big Jack’s Billiards. Carolina Slim got them first hand from the posse of shoplifters.

However, the prostate cancer (or the “Big C”) as the folks took to saying, gave him less than the three months to live, once it was diagnosed at the VA. Some folks thought that when they opened him up, the air hit the disease and it spread like wild fire, but that was “pool hall” talk. The educated folks knew better. It spread anyway (the bad news) through the community.

Slim didn’t go out quietly. He announced every day that he had left on earth, about the perils of not checking out” yawl’s shit”, as he so delicately put it. “Most black men don’t want no doctor sticking his finger up they butt, (he said), so, they don’t go git checked out’. Funny thing is they always trying tah ream some chick in the booty, “goin’ for the gold.” But they cain’t stand the thought of a man bending them over to see if they got prostate problems or worse, cancer. They be holding on to that bullshit pride. Would rather die than to find out what time it is.” Carolina was right, but nobody paid any attention to him, until after he “got outta here” as they said about his passing.