

IN FROM THE COLD

By

Chuck Cascio

Copyright: Chuck Cascio, all rights reserved

NOTE: This story is taken from the collection entitled *AWAKENINGS: Short Stories of Moments That Shape Us* by Chuck Cascio available on Amazon at <https://a.co/d/hP9g4NA>

Dead mid-winter in 1967 in New York City and everything on campus and around campus and even around the world seemed cold. News was bad, war was raging, school was boring, dates were not working out, and the visible chill of frost clung permanently to our dorm room window. I envied my roommate, Pete, because he was a sleeper capable of comfortably hibernating under the warmth provided by mounds of blankets above him. But it just didn't work for me. When in bed, I could only feel the chill of the sheets beneath me and think of a future filled with questions.

Exactly what drew me and my friends to the dark pool hall above the gray shop on a midtown street, I don't remember. I was not a shark, nor a hustler, nor even a good player but there was something about practicing the strange game there that provided a relief of sorts. In that hall, evenings passed slowly and the few guys I went with were always very quiet, putting other thoughts aside as they concentrated hard on their game. We knew what was expected of us in the tiny room where smoke hung thick in the shaded yellow light above each table. Everything there seemed so simple. We just stretched across the green carpet on the table top, concentrated, tapped the cue ball squarely, and the shot either rolled and plunked into a pocket or it didn't. No mid-ground. No waiting. Immediate knowledge of success or failure.

In classes I imagined different shots while I took notes mechanically in classrooms that echoed from the dry cold air outside. In the pool hall of my mind, all the impossible shots disappeared into the emptiness of the pockets. But I thought of the frustrations, too. The near misses. The shots that hung on the lip of the pocket, the ball teetering but not falling, and me wondering why I hadn't stroked just a little harder.

My friends and I hungered to play. We talked about pool while walking in the cold, still air, our breath coming out in white bursts. The tiny pool hall became a sanctuary. There was no frost there, no windows, no future--only the warmth of friends and the immediacy of times present.

Late one Saturday afternoon I went to a small, favorite bar with Neil, one of my friends whose brother had recently been drafted and was already headed to Vietnam. The bar was a typical local Manhattan side-street hangout sprinkled with New York's distinctive mix of townies. The bartender was also the owner, a friendly guy who had one eye sewed shut. There was just one pool table; you slid in four quarters, and the table's plastic cover lifted up so you could get at the balls. A couple of city types were playing and they had that possessive air that said the table would be theirs for a long time.

Neil normally cracked Lenny Bruce-type jokes incessantly, but now he was somber, shivering. "I want to play," he said. "Maybe it will get my mind off my brother. But those guys, they're not gonna move."

"Yeah," I responded. "Fuckers look like they plan to stay there all night."

"Well, I got news for them," Neil said. Then he surprised me by calling out: "Hey, guys! Play us? Losers pay, buy beers, and sit down. Winners keep the table and drink the beers. You in?"

The New Yorkers took a quick look at us and accepted the challenge eagerly. The game was eight ball. They shot first. Helplessly, incredulously, Neil and I watched as the first shooter ran a string of phenomenal shots until all he had left to drop was the eight ball.

I looked out of the bar's lone window and saw a smattering of snowflakes floating to the gray sidewalk. I didn't want to go back out into the empty cold.

The shooter leaned across the table and drew his stick back firmly, confidently. He struck the white cue ball squarely and it bumped the black eight ball, which then began a slow journey toward the pocket. I had already begun to despair, thinking you can't escape certain truths no matter how hard you try. The cold--it is always out there waiting to deaden feelings, and thoughts, and life itself.

The eight ball thumped into the pocket. I cursed. So did Neil. But then we realized that the cue ball had not stopped rolling! Instead, the white ball crawled after the black ball. It hung on the lip of the pocket and then disappeared from sight. Scratch! Salvation is a cue ball with a mind of its own! Neil and I shouted an array of cheers.

The townies bought the beers and said they wanted a rematch. We gave it to them. But we shot first. This time, they never even got a chance to shoot. They bought another round, lost again, and left the bar.

Neil and I racked up a game or two by ourselves. More people entered the bar, shivering, light snow dappling their jackets, their ears aglow. Once inside the bar's warmth, they smiled, friendly, comfortable, red-cheeked.

Throughout the night, challengers lined up to try to claim the rights to the table. Neil and I conquered them all. Hours passed and still we won. The one-eyed bartender bought us

sandwiches--ham-and-swiss on toast. Every pair of challengers paid for the chance to play. We drank for free, loser after loser buying.

Neil and I scarcely spoke, just sharing an occasional smile, a wink, a smirk. Outwardly, our victories were accepted calmly. Inside, I burst with childlike glee, and I was sure Neil did too.

It was midnight when the small crowd in the bar slowly began disappearing into the frigid night. Our final unsuccessful challengers quit in disgust. There was no one left to play. The bartender bought us one last beer, congratulated us again, and told us to be sure to return.

Neil and I walked to the door. He stepped outside before me and I watched him stand still, searching the stars. I slowly held the door and glanced back inside. Smoke still hovered low in the gritty bar. The bartender waved as he covered the pool table and turned off the lights. I closed the door. Outside, the cold night air felt good when it stung my face.

THE END