The Lemon Tree Billiards House

The Lemon Tree Billiards House is on the first floor of an old concrete building on King Street, between Aloha Electronics and Uncle Phil’s Flowers. The building is old and the pool hall isn’t very large—just nine tables, a ceiling fan, and a soda machine. No one seems to know how the place got its name. Some say it used to be a Korean bar. Others say it was a funeral home. But all seem to agree that it has a lousy name for a pool hall. At one point someone circulated a petition requesting the name be changed. But Mr. Kong, the proud owner, wouldn’t budge. He said his pool hall would always be called the Lemon Tree Billiards House.

Mr. Kong keeps his rates very reasonable. For two dollars an hour, you can hit all of the balls you want. One day I was in there playing eight ball with a sixty-eight-year-old parking attendant. The guy played pretty well—I was squeezing for a while—but he missed a tough slice and left me enough openings to clear the table and sink the eight ball. I won twenty bucks.

Another guy walked up to me. He had a mustache, a baseball cap, and a flannel shirt.

“My name Hamilton,” he said. “I ain’t too good—but what—you like play?”
I ain’t too good. Sure.

“My name’s Mitch,” I said. “Let’s play.”

We agreed on fifty bucks. Hamilton racked the balls. I broke. It was a good one. The sound of the balls cracking against each other was like a hundred glass jars exploding.

As three striped balls—the nine, twelve, and fifteen—shot into three different pockets, I noticed a good-looking girl in a black dress sitting on a stool in the corner. I don’t know if I was imagining it or not but I thought I caught her looking my way. I missed an easy shot on the side pocket. I’d burned my finger cooking saimin and couldn’t get a good grip on the cue stick.

“Oh, too bad,” said Hamilton. “Hard luck! I thought you had me there.” He was what I call a talker. The kind of guy who can’t keep his mouth shut. The kind of guy who treats a game of pool like a radio call-in show.

Anyway, Hamilton hit four balls in but stalled on the fifth. I eventually won the game.

Afterward, the girl in the black dress walked up to me.

“Hi,” she said, smiling.

“Hello,” I said.

“You’re pretty good,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“You wanna play my dad?”

“Who’s your dad?”

“You wanna play or not?”

“Who is he?”

“He’ll give you five hundred bucks if you beat him.”

“Let’s go.”

I’m a pool hustler and the Lemon Tree Billiards House is my turf. You see, I’ve been playing pool all my life. It’s the only thing I
know how to do. My dad taught me the game before they threw him in jail. I dropped out of school, left home, and traveled around the country challenging other pool players. I've played the best. Now I'm home.

All right, all right. I'm not a pool hustler. I'm a freshman at the University of Hawai'i. And my dad's not in jail. He's an accountant. And I never challenged players around the country. I did play a game in Waipahu once.

I have been playing pool for a while, though. Sometimes I do real well. Sometimes I don't. That's how the game is for me. Four things can happen when I pick up a cue stick. One, sometimes I feel like I'll win and I win. Two, sometimes I feel like I'll win and I lose. Three, sometimes I feel like I'll lose and I lose. Four, sometimes I feel like I'll lose and I win.

I'll tell you one thing, though. I could've been a better pool player if I hadn't been cursed. Yes, cursed.

It all happened back when I was seven years old. My dad had taken me to a beach house. I'm not sure where it was. Somewhere near Mālāekahana, maybe. I remember walking along the beach and seeing some large boulders. I began climbing on the rocks, trying to get a good look at the ocean and the crashing waves. The view was stunning. The water was so blue. And I thought I spotted some whales playing in the surf offshore.

All of a sudden, my father came running down the beach. “Mitch!” he said. “Get off da rocks! Da rocks sacred! No climb up there! No good!”

Ever since that day, I've lived with a curse. One day in the eighth grade, I dropped a touchdown pass and we lost a big intramural football game. I smashed my first car three minutes after I drove it off the lot. My first girlfriend left me for a guy in prison she read about in the papers. I'm the kind of guy who will throw down four queens in a poker game, only to watch helplessly as some clown tosses down
four kings. If I buy something at the market, it’ll go on sale the next day.

It hasn’t been easy. The only thing I do okay is play eight ball. But I could’ve been better. If it just weren’t for this curse.

I DON’T KNOW why I agreed to play pool with this strange girl’s father. Maybe it was because she was so beautiful. The best-looking woman I’ve ever seen. Six feet, two hundred pounds, hairy legs, mustache. Okay, okay. So she wasn’t that beautiful. Let’s just say she was kind of average.

Anyway, we got into her car and she drove toward the Wai’anae coast. She had one of those big black sedans you saw in the seventies. The kind Jack Lord used to drive to ‘Iolani Palace in Hawai’i Five-O. In about a half hour or so, we wound up at a large beach house with water mills and bronze Buddhas in the yard. Everywhere you looked, you saw trees. Mango, avocado, papaya, banana.

“My dad likes to plant things,” the girl explained.

We walked past a rock garden and a koi pond, and she led me into a room with a pool table. There were dozens of cues lined up neatly on the wall, just like at the Lemon Tree Billiards House.

“You can grab a stick,” the girl said. “I’ll go get my dad.”

In a few minutes I realized why she didn’t want to tell me who her father was. I was standing face-to-face with Locust Cordero. The Locust Cordero. All six-five, 265 pounds of him. Wearing, of all things, a purple tuxedo with a red carnation in the lapel. Locust Cordero, who stood trial for the murder-for-hire deaths of three Salt Lake gamblers several years back. I was about to play eight ball with a hit man.

“Howzit,” he said. “Mahalos for coming. My name Locust.”
What should I say? I know who you are? I've heard of you? I've seen your mug shots on TV? Congratulations on your recent acquittal? Nice tuxedo?

“Nice to meet you, sir,” I said, settling on the conservative. “I'm Mitch.”

We shook hands. He wore a huge jade ring on his finger.

“My daughter says you pretty good.”

“I try, sir.”

“How you like my tuxedo?” he said.

“Nice,” I said.

“Shaka, ah?” he said, running his hands over the material. “Silk, brah. Just bought ’em. What size you?”

“What?”

“What size you?” he repeated, opening up a closet. I was stunned. There must have been two dozen tuxedos in there. All sizes. All colors. Black, white, maroon, pink, blue, red. “Here,” said Locust, handing me a gold one. “Try put dis beauty on.”

“Uh,” I said. “How about the black one?”

Again, I was leaning toward the conservative.

“Whatevahs,” said Locust, shrugging.

I changed in the bathroom. It took me awhile because I'd never worn a tuxedo before. When I walked out, Locust smiled.

“Sharp,” he said. “Look at us. Now we really look like pool players.”

Locust chalked his cue stick. He was so big, the stick looked like a toothpick in his hands.

“Break ’em, Mitch.”

“Yes, sir.”

I walked to the table and broke. I did it real fast. I don’t like to think about my shots too long. That always messes me up. Crack!

Not bad. Two solid balls shot into the right corner pocket.

“Das too bad,” said Locust, shaking his head.
“Why’s that, sir?” I asked.

“Cause,” said Locust, “I hate to lose.”

ONE DAY NOT too long before, I’d visited an exorcist. To get rid of my curse. He was an old Hawaiian man in his late forties or early fifties, recommended to me by a friend. When I called for an appointment, he said he couldn’t fit me in. There were a lot of folks out there with problems, I guessed. I told him it was an emergency.

“Okay, come ovah,” he said. “But hurry up.”

I drove to his house. He lived in Pālolo Valley. I was very scared. What would happen? I could see it now. As soon as I walked into the room, the man would scream and run away from me. He’d tell me he saw death and destruction written all over my face. The wind would blow papers all over his room, and I’d be speaking weird languages I had never heard before and blood and mucus would pour out my mouth.

But nothing like that happened. I walked into his house, expecting to see him chanting or praying. Instead he was sitting behind a koa desk in a Munsingwear shirt and green polyester pants.

“Dis bettah be good,” he said. “I went cancel my tee time at Ala Wai for you.”

I smiled. I told him my plight. I started from the beginning—telling him about the day I climbed on the rocks and the bad luck I’ve had ever since.

“You ain’t cursed,” the man said. He bent down to pick something up from the floor. What was it? An ancient amulet? A charm? None of the above. It was a golf club. An eight iron. “Da mind is one very powerful ting,” he said, waving the eight iron around like a magician waving a wand. “It can make simple tings difficult and difficult tings simple.”

“What about the rocks?” I said.
“Tink positive,” the man said. “You one negative buggah. Da only curse is in your mind.”

That’s it? No reading scripture? No chanting?

“I tell you one ting, brah,” the Hawaiian man said. “One day, you going encountah one challenge. If you beat ’em, da curse going be pau. But if you lose, da rest of your life going shrivel up like one slug aftah you pour salt on top.”

“Anything else?” I said.

“Yeah,” said the Hawaiian man. “You owe me twenty bucks.”

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**Locust and** I had played ten games. We’d agreed on eleven. I’d won five, he’d won five. In between, his daughter brought us fruit punch and smoked marlin. It was already dark, and I had an oceanography test the next day.

In the final game, I hit an incredible shot—the cue ball jumping over Locust’s ball, like a fullback leaping over a tackler, and hitting the seven into the side pocket. This seemed to piss Locust off. He came right back with a beauty of his own—a massé I couldn’t believe. In a massé, the cue ball does bizarre things on the table after being hit—like weaving between balls as if it has a mind of its own. Those are the trick shots you see on TV. Anyway, Locust hit a massé, where the cue ball hit not one, not two, not three, but four of his balls into four different holes. *Come on!* I was convinced Locust could make the cue ball spell his name across the green velvet sky of the pool table.

Pretty soon it was just me, Locust, and the eight ball. I looked at Locust real fast, and he stared at me like a starving man sizing up a Diner’s chicken *katsu* plate lunch. I took a shot, but my arm felt like a lead pipe and I missed everything. Locust took a deep breath, blew his shot, and swore in three different languages. It was my turn.

And then I realized it. This was the moment that would make or
break me. The challenge the exorcist guy was talking about. I had to win.

I measured the table, paused, and said the words that would change my life and save me from shriveling up like a slug with salt poured on it.

“Eight ball. Corner pocket.”

I would have to be careful. Gentle. It was a tough slice to the right corner pocket. If I hit the cue ball too hard, it could fall into the wrong pocket. That would be a scratch. I would lose.

I took a deep breath, cocked my stick, and aimed. I hit the cue ball softly. From here, everything seemed to move in slow motion. The cue ball tapped the eight ball and the eight ball seemed to take hours to roll toward the hole. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Locust’s daughter standing up from her seat, her hands covering her mouth.

CLACK. Flop.

The ball fell into the hole. The curse was lifted. I had won. I would have been a happy man if I hadn’t been so damned scared.

Locust walked up to me, shaking his head. He reached into his pocket. Oh, no. Here it comes. He was gonna take out his gun, shoot me, and bury my body at some deserted beach. Good-bye, cruel world. Thanks for the memories . . .

“I no can remembah da last time I lost,” he said, pulling out his wallet and handing me five crispy one-hundred-dollar bills. “Mahalos for da game.”

Locust asked me to stay and talk for a while. We sat on straw chairs next to the pool table. The place was dark except for several gaslit torches hissing like leaky tires. Hanging on the walls were fishing nets and dried, preserved fish, lobsters, and turtles.

“You must be wondering why we wearing dese tuxedos,” said Locust.
“Yeah,” I said.

“Well, dis whole night, it’s kinda one big deal for me.” Locust leaned toward me. “You see, brah, I nevah leave my house in five years.”

“Why?” I said. I couldn’t believe it.

“All my life, everybody been scared of me,” said Locust, sighing. “Everywheah I go, people look at me funny. Dey whispah behind my back.”

“But—”

“Lemme tell you someting,” he continued. “Dey went try me for murder coupla times. Both times, da jury said I was innocent. Still, people no like Locust around. Dey no like see me. And das why I nevah step foot outta dis place.”

“Forgive me for saying so, sir,” I said. “But that’s kinda sad. That’s no way to live.”

“Oh, it ain’t dat bad,” said Locust. “I play pool. I go in da ocean, spear uhu. I throw net for mullet. Once in a while, I go in da mountains behind da house and shoot me one pig…”

“But don’t you ever miss getting out and walking around the city? Experiencing life?”

I was getting nervous again. I mean, here I was, giving advice on how to live to Locust Cordero. After I had just beaten the guy at eight ball.

“Whasso great about walking around da streets of da city?” said Locust after a while. “People shooting and stabbing each othah. Talk- ing stink about each othah. Stealing each othah’s husbands and wives. Breaking each othah’s hearts.”

“You scared?” I said, pressing my luck.

“Yeah,” said Locust, looking me straight in the eye, “I guess I am.”

We didn’t say anything for a while. I could hear the waves of the ocean breaking on the beach.

“So,” said Locust, shifting in his seat, “where you went learn to shoot pool?”
“The Lemon Tree Billiards House,” I said.

“Da Lemon Tree Billiards House?” Locust said, shaking his head. “What kine name dat? Sound like one funeral home.”

“Sir,” I said, “I’m sorry. Can I say something?”

“Sure.”

“You’re living your life like a prisoner. You might as well have been convicted of murder and locked in jail.”

Yeah, sometimes it seems I just don’t know when to shut up.

“Evah since I was one kid, I had hard luck,” said Locust, moving closer to me and whispering. “You see, I’m cursed.”

“You’re what?” I said, surprised.

“I’m cursed,” Locust repeated, raising his voice. “Jeez, for one young kid, you get lousy hearing, ah? Must be all dat loud music you buggahs listen to nowadays.”

“How’d you get cursed?” I said.

“One day, when I was one kid, I was climbing some rocks looking out at da ocean. Down Mālaekahana side. All of a sudden, my bruddah start screamin’, ‘Get down from there. No good. Da rocks sacred.’”

I couldn’t believe it. Locust and I were cursed by the same rocks. We were curse brothers.

“Da ting’s beat me,” said Locust, shaking his head.

“You’re talking like a loser.”

“A what?” said Locust, getting out of his chair.

“Locust,” I said, my voice cracking, “I lived with the same curse and I beat it.”


“You gotta believe in yourself.”

“How you do dat?”

“With your mind,” I said. “See, the first thing you gotta do is meet a challenge and beat it,” I said. “Go outside. Walk the streets. Meet people.”
“You evah stop for tink how dangerous da world is?” said Locust.
“Tink about it. How many tings out there are ready, waiting, for screw you up. Death, sickness, corruption, greed, old age . . .”
It was scary. Locust was starting to make sense.
“I don’t know,” I finally said.
“Tink about it,” said Locust. “Tink about it.”

One day several weeks later, I was playing eight ball at the Lemon Tree Billiards House. Several people were arguing about the source of an unusual smell. Some said it came from a cardboard box filled with rotten choy sum outside on the sidewalk in front of the pool hall. Others said it was Kona winds blowing in the pungent smell of taegu from Yuni’s Bar-B-Q. Still others said the peculiar smell came from Old Man Rivera, who sat in a corner eating a lunch he had made at home. Too much patis—fish sauce—in his sari sari.

“If you like good smell,” said Mr. Kong, the owner of the Lemon Tree Billiards House, “go orchid farm. If you like play pool, come da Lemon Tree Billiards House.”

I was on table number three with a young Japanese guy with short hair. He had dark glasses and wore a black suit. He looked like he was in the yakuza.

I had already beaten three guys. I was on a roll. It gets like that every now and then. When you know you can’t miss.

The yakuza guy never smiled. And everytime he missed a shot, he swore at himself. Pretty soon he started to hit the balls very hard—thrusting his cue stick like a samurai spearing an opponent. He was off, though, and I eventually won the game.

“You saw how I beat the yakuza guy?” I said to Mr. Kong, who was now on a stepladder unscrewing a burned-out lightbulb.

“Yakuza guy?” said Mr. Kong. “What yakuza guy?”

“The Japanese guy in the suit,” I said.

“Oh,” said Mr. Kong, laughing like crazy. “You talking about
Yatsu! Das my neighbor. He ain’t no *yakuza*. He one preschool teachah!”

Just then, Locust Cordero walked into the Lemon Tree Billiards House. Mr. Kong stopped laughing. Everyone stopped their games. No one said a word. The only sound I heard was the ticking of a clock on the wall.

“Mitch,” said Locust, “I went take your advice. I no like live like one prisonah no more.”

I was speechless.

“You know what dey say,” said Locust. “Feel like one five-hundred-pound bait has been lifted from my shoulders.”


“What evahs,” said Locust. “Da curse is gone.”

He walked over to one of Mr. Kong’s finest tables, ran his thick fingers over the smooth wood, and looked into the deep pockets like a child staring down a mysterious well.

“Eight ball?” he asked, turning to me.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling. “Yeah, sure.”