

Atta Boy

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I don't gamble. Oh sure, I leap before I look, I put off to tomorrow what I should do today, I drive too fast and vote in elections, I cross the street in the middle of the block, have money in the stock market, eat fast food hamburgers – in short, I get out of bed in the morning. But when it comes to games of chance, I am as pure as, well insert your favorite metaphor here. On my first visit to Nevada I put a nickel in a slot machine just to see the fruit roll around. I didn't win and that may be the only nickel I ever lost gambling. It's not that I have any moral compunction about the fall of the cards, the roll of the dice or the spin of the ball; it's just that I learned early on that the thrill of money for nothing is not enough to pay for, "Boys, my money's all gone."

I should say here that my attitude makes me an odd-man-out among the men of my family. My father won the down payment for our modest Cape Cod in the Dayton suburbs playing every kind of card game in the Pacific theater in WWII. My brother won enough to pay a pretty hefty income tax bill playing poker up and down the Alaskan pipeline in the '70s. Oh the tales they told! They told about men who had a thing I didn't – that knack for sizing up opponents and the ability to turn those insights into victory at the table.

"Never gamble with money you can't afford to lose," these words of wisdom from my father, a keen, quiet, patient man who knew a thing or two about gambling. Any card game gave him a chance to demonstrate this. "Don't play against the house," further

advice by which he meant to avoid games where the odds were stacked against you. Both admonitions will figure in my story.

It's summer 1963. I am about to enter my junior year of high school. I don't have a regular job but manage to afford the pleasures and necessities of 16-year-old life by carrying golf bags at the local country club about a mile from home. Money is the heart and bane of family life. There isn't enough. Dad is out of work for perhaps the only time in his life; Mom has gone to secretarial school and works in a builders' supply office. We get by, but only with a lot of angst-clouded discussions.

Normal weekday. Mom off to work. Dad offers a lift to the country club on his way to shop for a week's groceries with the last twenty dollars we have 'til mom gets paid. We pull into the lot of the Atta Boy gas station just across Salem Ave. from the country club. I'm off to the caddy shack and draw a high number which means I have some time to kill until I get out and so back across Salem to kill said time at a burger shack and I notice our car still parked at the Atta Boy.

Inside at a standing desk are Dad and, let's say, Carl, the manager, playing blackjack for a nickel a hand. A thrill of anxiety runs through me as I remember last night's family discussion and imagine tonight's if Dad comes home without twenty dollars worth of groceries. Because my parents are naturally frugal and spurred by necessity, we manage to eat pretty well on twenty a week. Because dad is good at cards and my six bucks for carrying two kangaroo golf bags for the four hours and six miles around eighteen holes can make up the difference should he hit a run of bad luck, I relax a bit, but, "Never gamble with money you can't afford to lose," seems like a good rule being flouted by its author. But the money isn't much and the nickels and the cards pass

around the desk with a twinkling of hands, nobody winning or losing much, just time passing among men who would rather trade nickels than do nothing.

It was then two boys from school came in to pay for gas. Seeing the cards and nickels, one says, “Can anybody get in this game?” I know these guys, Larry and Jimmie; they’re a year older and come from the “right side of the tracks.” I can see they think a couple of math-smart boys like they are will have no trouble leaving with all the nickels on the desk and, who knows, maybe more.

Carl and Dad shrug and after advising that this was only a friendly game, deal the boys in. They must have just been to Vegas because they know the casino rules – split a pair and play twice, tap the desk for a hit, and never hit 17. The other reason I think they’ve been to a casino is when it comes time to pass the deck to Larry he just says, “No. You deal, we’ll just play.” My father registers this with a look that only I notice. The look says something like, “Well if you boys want to play against the house, ok, but you’ll be playing against the house.”

I don’t know if they feel like shuffling and dealing is beneath them, or in their 18-year-old certainty that they already know everything there is to know about blackjack, or their contempt for these old, thirty-something idlers clouds their judgment, but there it is. Just before I leave to caddy my round, they propose playing for a quarter a hand and everyone is so focused on the play of the paste boards that no one notices my departure.

A short digression on blackjack. One of the casino world’s most popular games of chance, the casino, because it employs the dealer, always wins in the long run. I won’t bother you with the basics except to point out that any hand 12 and up can be bust with only one hit. About a third of the cards have enough value to do this. The dealer,

gentleman that he is, always allows the others to take that chance first. Should the opponent go bust, the dealer doesn't have to risk hitting a 14 or 15. This little edge is all it takes for the house to win in the long run, if the run is long enough. And always wins, if the run is long enough.

From the tee shot on one to replacing the flag on eighteen, Dad and the card game are on my mind. After four and a half hours I collect my six bucks and head for home. I get no farther than Salem Ave and I see the car still parked at the Atta Boy. Just as I poke my head in the door I see Jimmie and Larry, red-faced, angry, muttering about card sharps, picking up what's left of their dignity and their money (not much of either), and heading for their car. Inside Dad is swapping quarters for dollars with Carl, expression unchanged, preparing to leave.

I soon learn the details of what I have already guessed. In five hours or so of blackjack, always refusing the deal, Larry and Jimmie had gradually lost the forty or fifty dollars they had on them. Demanding with 18-year-old sanctimony that Dad couldn't quit winners without giving them a chance to win their money back, they had gone to the savings and loan, gotten twice that and returned to lose that too. In their desperation, their play had gotten more extreme. Losing fifty dollars had taken 4 hours; the next hundred was gone in an hour or so.

When we had a private moment, I challenged Dad with, "I thought you taught me never gamble with money you can't afford to lose!" I had been in agony for 18 holes thinking about the family discussion sure to follow the loss of the grocery money. And however Dad explained it, I was mixed up in it.

"I did teach you that."

“So the grocery money was money you could afford to lose?”

”Well son, there are some other rules. Here’s one; look around the table and see who the patsy is. If you don’t see him, it’s you. If you do see him, you have to decide what to do. Let him off the hook or take his money. Those boys today were rude and acted high and mighty. They were smart in a way, but not about blackjack and not about people. It was like they were wearing a sign that said ‘Take my money.’ I’d have sooner left those boys alone, but they were so determined and so snotty I decided if they wanted a lesson I would help them out.”

He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and peeled me off a ten. “It’s probably better if we don’t tell your mother about this.”

And we never did. Some 50 years later, after Dad passed away, I finally did share this story with my mother. I don’t know what I expected, but the years had softened her anxieties about money and she had mellowed. She just smiled and said, “He always did have a way with cards.”