

The Kilowatt

by H. W. Moss

Billiard chalk is not chalk at all. It is a combination of talc silica and aloxite (aluminum oxide) in frangent crystals. “Frangible” means breaking or fracturing easily without implying weakness or delicacy.

Modern cue chalk was invented in 1897 by William A. Spinks, a world class professional billiard player, and William Hoskins, a chemist. It is made by crushing silica and the abrasive substance corundum or aloxite, into a powder. This is combined with dye, usually blue-green, green and sometimes red, then compressed into a cube that pool players hold up in front of an opponent who miscues on the break and say: “Chalk is free.”

Believe me, everyone who plays pool at the Watt knows Miss Cue.

The purpose of cue chalk, which is not chalk at all remember, is to make the tip of a cue stick stick, not slide, on the cue ball when struck. It is not unusual to put such an angle on a shot, known as English, the tip skips off without making proper contact. Cue chalk prevents this. Most players swear by it and chalk up between every shot. Many carry their own preferred brand with them when they come in to play at the Kilowatt.

Mark recently showed off his \$30 cube of cue chalk which, he claimed, is worth every penny. Cue never skips. Tommy, on the other hand, thinks it’s a huge scam.

Daniel grew up on the Self Realization Fellowship meditation retreat called Ananda which is in Nevada City, California. His mother is a disciple of the Paramahansa Yogananda and Daniel escaped as quickly as he could. At sixteen he ran away from home and moved into the back room of a record store in Grass Valley.

These days he shoots on Jerz's team and earns his living making high quality wood furniture. Daniel tried his hand at commercial contracts, but soon learned they are much less profitable, and business people more devious, than the public élite for whom he makes specialized sofas, couches and parlor chairs. Daniel's dog is named Cocoa and her fur resembles spilled mocha on a white floor. She is the offspring of a bitch named Steve and Daniel always brings her with him to the Watt.

Daniel rents a work space off Bayshore in which he lives. He was riding his bicycle in front of French Hospital several years ago when the vehicle in front of him abruptly stopped and he crashed into it, rolled off. His leg was crushed by the car behind him. The injury was so severe he nearly lost the limb, but because he was so close to a hospital, care was almost immediate. The leg was saved, his limp has all but disappeared and his gait returned to normal. Only trouble is, Daniel had no insurance. He now has a \$260,000 outstanding bill which he will never be able to pay.

Daniel signs up on the board at the Kilowatt as Daniel to distinguish himself from Danny who is from Leitrim, Ireland. Born in 1957, Danny looks to be the oldest person in the bar, but he is not. Like all his kinsmen exported as laborers in the late 60's, Danny was in construction, but arrived in the City in time to take advantage of the housing boom of the late 70's. He now owns several multi-unit buildings and is worth millions, but he maintains them himself. He recently complained of having to pull a toilet and pull paper towels out of it for the second time in two weeks. Danny's prowess with a pool stick earns him the distinction of being among the top five pool players in San Francisco and he regularly goes to Vegas for the national playoffs. Danny can out shoot everyone in the room, most of whom are half his age.

Danny's ability is, of course, due to good hand eye co-ordination, but also partly to the fact that Irish pubs tend not to have pool tables as large as those in America. The average Irish pool table is half the length and width of an American table, the balls about the size of ping pong balls and the sticks toothpicks. The pockets are tiny, but Irish pool shooters become proficient at potting balls on this size table and when they come to the States have an immediate advantage.

“Bookets,” the lads are prone to say. “Pockets big as bookets!”

Danny's back was injured early in his construction career and he often suffers bouts of spinal pain which he relieves with copious amounts of marijuana, alcohol and tobacco.

Diogo was born in Brazil. Notice the spelling of his name. It is a Portuguese boy's name which means “representative.” Diogo speaks fluent Spanish, Portuguese and English without an accent. At 32 he is nearly Danny's equal on the pool table. They play on the same team for Skip's Tavern in what is sometimes called the Dream Team. Diogo married an American girl out of love, never got around to getting his citizenship while they were married, but did so several years after they divorced. One day a woman came into the bar and a legend was born: “The Dyke Who Looked Like Diogo.” The two were not in the room at the same time, so it is likely they looked nothing alike, but the idea was planted and, since she never returned, it was later said Diogo has a female twin.

Hannah is six years younger than Diogo and wears a ring through her septum bull-like. She has no other distinguishing piercings, brands or tattoos. She is a paramedic on an EMT truck having completed six months' of free labor as an intern. She turned up one day, signed the board as HH and won her first game against Diogo. She shot well enough

to be invited immediately to join a league team and if she continues to progress, stands a good chance of playing in the National Championship finals.

Peter, the owner of the bar, is a licensed electrician. Kilowatt. Get it? Motorcycle racing photos of him in protective riding gear cover the back wall above the pinball machine. He has two massive golden retrievers, but rarely brings them into the bar. However, it has become widely known that Kilowatt is dog friendly. At least 50 framed photos of patron pets rise on the wall above the pool tables. At any given moment, there can be several dogs inside, some on leashes, some roaming freely.

Noah was born in Germany, but grew up on America's East Coast. He speaks and reads German, sounds like a Southern Californian. Bald with a short trimmed goatee, he admits, "Every other time I shave my face I shave my head."

Noah favors Radeberger Pilsner which is served in a tall mug. He carries it around the bar held high in his right hand as if it were the torch in the hand of the Statue of Liberty. He has the stout body of a Hofmeister. Noah's face is round and his eyes bulge slightly. You can see the bottom of his whites, the sclera, a condition called sanpaku which, when asked said he had never heard the term. President John Kennedy had eyes sanpaku.

Mid-thirties, Noah is a sound engineer and a voice technician with the title Senior Sound Designer. He has also done voice over work, narration and intoned characters for two of Mattel's Sing-A-Ma-Jigs. But he does not know which two because he did the work independent of the toys. And when speeded up, you can't tell they are human voices even if you listen hard.

When you are on the eight, Noah non-surreptitiously pulls from his pocket imaginary Pixie Dust which he sprinkles in the subject of your shot, the hole you're aiming at. Sometimes the magic works, sometimes it doesn't.

Kelsey is Noah's dog and she accompanies him everywhere, even to work. She is a rescue dog, half Basenji half Labrador mix with short black fur except for a white breastplate, four mottled white feet and her tail which has a white tip. Noah believes the mix ought to be considered a special breed. When you look at her front on, Kelsey's face and pointy ears look like Yoda.

"Girls with Guns" is the title of a photo which shows the four ladies with bright smiles each holding a shotgun. It appears on two of their computers as a screen saver and on all four of their cell phones. The occasion was a Whittier skeet range outing which is ironic in light of the fact that city was founded by Quakers. Two are sisters, all four are pool players, but only Tanner, Jaime and Khanh come into the Watt regularly. Also of note: Whittier was President Nixon's birthplace.

Jaime pronounces her name with a hard "J," not an "H." Her Mexican mother wanted a boy.

Rich is estranged from his 86-year-old father who ditched Rich's mother and moved back to the Philippines where he hooked up with a woman sixty years younger and wrote a will favoring her only. Rich still sees his sister and mother at Thanksgiving, but they live in San Jose which is an impossible trip for him without a car and only his skateboard.

Rich spent ten years driving for United Parcel. He fell asleep at the wheel one night, awoke with barely enough time to save himself and the cargo, but decided this was no way to live; he would certainly die on the road. So he quit.

These days he is a dog walker and trainer.

Karma is Rich's dog, a very good natured pit bull. She is a dusky brown with white paws, white on her breast plate and a white Indian arrow head on her back at the neck line pointing to her skull. She answers to her name and I like to say, "Good Karma. Bad Karma."

Karma is Rich's means of power on his skateboard. She is trained to pull him. Rich wanted to make movies of his brother who is a professional skateboarder. With that in mind, he acquired a copy of Final Cut Pro for his laptop and learned it well enough to make a video that has been seen more than 40,000 times on YouTube.

Mark, with the \$30 piece of chalk, dresses like a lumberjack complete with cap and hunting jacket. He grew up in Humboldt County, learned coding on his own and is now a high mucky muck with Apple. When I learned he was on the team that created the latest version of Final Cut Pro, I told him Rich is expert in it. I asked if Mark knows the program: "Heck no. It's way too complicated." Mark plays league and wears a tee shirt with the statement, "Be quiet or I will turn you into a very small shell script."

Rhys was born in Wales, took a Ph. D. in mathematics and moved to San Francisco where he bought a condominium half way up one of its famous hills. He describes his work as, "You know how people turn on the tap and expect water to come out? Well, it all has to do with pipes. I maintain the pipes that deliver the Internet." Rhys has two tattoos, one on each arm. They are no larger than two inches wide and both are

mathematical terms. One is in hex and reads 4E 4F 20 47 4F 44. No, I'm not going to translate that for you; look it up yourself. The other is not something I ever wrote down, but when I asked Rhys he said it is Euler's Theory of Everything. Yep, you have to look that one up as well.

One day I introduced Rhys to a visiting Londoner saying Rhys is Welsh.

“Pat Welch? John Welch?”

James is a big man with black hair and a full black beard. He always wears a tight fitting bucket hat with ear flaps that look like what Cromwell's round heads wore only made of cloth. James goes through several pints a night and laughs at every shot he takes on the pool table. He laughs before he shoots, then stands there laughing afterwards, marveling at how it turned out.

Amy does not like this; she is convinced he is laughing at her. Amy recently completed her B. A. majoring in statistics. Her initials form the word “asp” and that's how she signs up on the board. She often wears a snake Ouroboros on her wrist. She is quite proficient on the table and came over to me a couple days ago displaying seven fingers, smiling with glee, still holding a cue in her hand, indicating she was on her seventh game in a row.

Tommy, who scoffs at Mark's chalk, is a mechanical engineer in the employ of the United States Government in the Presidio. He is an artist whose medium of choice is oils and admits to being a pool addict. He will play pool to the exclusion of everything else, including eating and painting. However, he hikes mountains and lives for weeks at a time every year in isolation alongside a stream. That stream could be in the Adirondacks or Yosemite, just so long as he sees no more than one or two others on the trail.

One evening after a PBS program about the doctor who treated John Wilkes Booth's broken leg, Dr. Samuel Mudd, I showed up at the club to find Tommy on the table. I mentioned the program and how the phrase, "Your name is Mudd," is not one "d" but two. And I told Tommy about the Dry Tortugas, which means turtle in Portuguese, where Mudd was sentenced to live out his life instead of being hanged as one of the Lincoln conspirators. And then Tommy asked, I thought at first rather incongruously, "Do you know my last name?"

By the time he had his wallet out to show his driver license, I kind of figured out why his question. He is, indeed, named Thomas Mudd and when I asked if it was the same family, he said it was. I told him there is the argument that Dr. Mudd was innocent and the family is still attempting to this day to have the name cleared. Tommy said that is not entirely correct and there is the belief, even among family members, the doctor knew Booth in advance of him showing up in the middle of the night for treatment.

There are three Sams who regularly play pool at the Watt. Like everyone else, they must sign up on the boards and to distinguish one from another, they sign up as plain old Sam, Sam L and Pork Chop.

Sam was born in Gaza and was eleven when Israel seized the territory in the 1967 war. He was twenty when he came to America with the help of his brother who is a U. S. citizen. "You got to have someone pull you out," Sam explained. Then he spent the next thirty years on the streets of San Francisco as a crack addict. Eventually, he got clean, found work in a rehab center, showed up at the Watt and signed up on the board. Nobody could read his handwriting so he was almost skipped that first night. Nor did he know how to play very well and nobody knew who he was or where he came from and no one

wanted to find out or become friendly with this guy who wore six large silver rings on various fingers, had a chain attached to his wallet and dressed like a recently unemployed hippie, if there ever was such a thing.

Then one of the most amazing transformations took place during the course of the next several years. A personality blossomed and people began to be able to read Sam's scrawl which gradually changed to three very legible letters and he entered a math class and an English class with the idea of passing the GED test to earn his high school equivalency.

In the mean time, Sam was accepted into an assistance program, obtained a subsidized hotel room, receives a monthly stipend and was able to qualify for a medical marijuana card that keeps him supplied. Plus, he learned to shoot, joined a team and last season won a trophy for the Most Valuable Player among all members of that league.

Sam L, on the other hand, has been a Muni bus driver for twenty years. He drove the 38 Geary, but has been on disability for the last year and intends to return to work soon. Sam L is an avid cinematographer and posts videos of pool players on YouTube.

Pork Chop is an unknown quantity who only shows up occasionally wearing a funny hat.

Brian drives a taxi and two days a week dispatches. Brian Boyd hasn't been coming in for some time now. Anybody named Brian knows his name will be misspelled "Brain" by anyone else who writes it. I sign Brain up that way on purpose. When I asked Brian Boyd if he ever misspelled his name as Brain, he said, "No. But the only anagram that can be made out of my name is 'brain body.'"

Chris V and Chris T sign up using the first letter of their last names to distinguish one another. One night when his name came up and before I knew who wrote it like that, I shouted, “Christ! Christ is up! Is Christ here?”

Henry and Hussein were both born in Amman, Jordan, but met in San Francisco. Henry is an excellent pool player but Hussein could stand a few lessons. One night I was playing Henry and it was my shot. I indicated the ball was to come off the far rail and into a corner. I said, “Back here.”

Hussein said, “Hunh?”

He wasn’t even playing, so I again said, “Back here,” and pointed out the intended pocket. Turns out that was his last name: Bakeer.

I told this story to Bill. He came back with, “I was playing a guy from Djiubouti. That’s in Africa near Egypt. He said he was a Sheik. As in Shake Djiubouti.”

Alfonso was born in Cuba, came to the States when he was ten as part of the 1980 Mariel boat lift. His father was one of Castro’s political prisoners who benefitted from Castro attempting to slip “undesirables” in with legitimate émigrés. Alfonso said his father refused our government subsidies and, with no prospect for work in Florida, moved to California where he worked three jobs and in five years saved enough to buy his first house.

Alfonso just bought his own first house in San Francisco where the prices are sky high. He can afford it, though, because his father inspired him to get a good education and he found a high paying job in the computer industry.

Alfonso has no accent, but he didn’t speak English when he arrived. He picked it up quick.

“Yah, the other kids used to call me a wetback, but after a while it didn’t mean anything,” Alfonso told me after he signed up and we were waiting to play. He sipped his rum and diet Coke and added, “Because, you see, I realized I was smarter than them, so it didn’t matter what they called me.”

Chun Kit is from Hong Kong and has a strong accent. He does not believe he has any trace of an accent at all. Because no American can pronounce his name properly, Chun Kit called himself Tom for years. More recently, following the trend of using initials, he began signing up as CK. He can be seen between games at a back table with his laptop listing items in his warehouse for sale on Ebay.

One day I missed a shot the onlookers thought was difficult, but it almost went in. I said, “Horse shoes and hand grenades.”

C K said, “Horse shoe? Hand grenade?” He rarely uses an “s” on the end of a word. That is because, as he once explained, there is no equivalent method of pluralizing in Chinese. “You have ten car. Or five dog. None of this craziness ess.”

I realized the idiomatic expression I had just used was something with which CK was not familiar. I turned to John P who was watching our game and asked if he could come up with another way to express how close the shot was. John P said, “It’s like the difference between Nagasaki and Hiroshima.”

Joel changes hair color as frequently as he changes clothes. That’s because he is a hairdresser with his own shop and can ask one of his chairs to do a do for him. Last week it was black with green tint. Last night it was pure white. Joel has captained several pool league teams.

Sergio is straight from Jalisco Mexico where his father grows agave and makes Tequila. Sergio signs up on the board as Serch. While working down the street as a waiter, he recently graduated from State with a degree in accounting. Sergio gets antsy when drunk. One day he was jumping around outside and, since he knew I was a writer, he said, "Teach me how to write. I want to learn to write."

I told him nobody can teach anyone to write. I said, "You have to do it on your own. Here's an idea. Put a pencil and paper next to your bed and when you wake up in the morning write down your dream."

Sergio said that was a great idea and I heard nothing more for about six months. Then he comes up and tells me, "I been doing whatchew said. I has been writing down my dreams and I got 50 pages of dreams to show you."

This sounded truly amazing. I was impressed and wanted to see what he had written and told him so.

He said regretfully, "Only trouble is they has to be translated. They're all in es-Spanish."

Jerry's last name starts with a Z, so he signs up as Jerz. This is familiar shorthand to the regulars, a complex incomprehensibility to newcomers who are simply unable to pronounce let alone read it.

Jerz was born in the Philippines and speaks fluent Spanish, Tagalog and English. He can recite several of Shakespeare's soliloquies and teaches special needs children in San Jose. Jerz must commute nearly an hour each way to play in the Tavern League where he is captain of one team and mother hen to four more. Jerz can be described as rotund. He is gay, dresses in drag for the Pride Parade and Hallowe'en when cross

dressing is common for all three sexes. As Sam L once remarked, “He’s a transvestite, but he’s our transvestite.” Jerz never shows up at the club in feminine apparel although he is given to wearing brightly colored shirts and pants and hanging large medallions made of gold or coral in art deco designs on thick beaded chains around his neck.

When Jerz first showed up at the Watt he demonstrated his skill and, after a match, took players aside. Turns out he was a talent scout recruiting for the league and a goodly number of previously ronin players took the opportunity and joined.

One of those was Marco. His first three names, and he has four, are Marcus Aurelius Antoninus which should identify his Italian ancestry if he ever wrote them out on the chalk board. But because brevity is the soul of writing your name on the board, he always signs up as Marco.

Marco loves riddles. He poses these whenever he can and avidly seeks new ones. It is hard to get the better of him. Here is an example: Three brothers had to race for their patrimony, their father specifying the last horse around the course will be the winner. They rode so slowly it took nearly all day to get to the first grove of trees. But shortly after they were out of sight, the three came galloping back as fast as they could toward the finish line. Why did they start out slow and end up fast?

Marco immediately answered, “They switched horses.”

John H asked, “A man walks up to a bartender and says something. The bartender pulls out a pistol and points it at the man’s head. The man says thank you and leaves. What just happened?”

Marco was able to work out the man had the hiccoughs. “He said, ‘May I, hic, may I have, hic, may I have a drink, hic, of water, hic.’”

John H signs up that way to differentiate himself from John P. John H shoots with a snooker cue which, like a pistol, has a nine millimeter tip instead of the typical 12 or 13 mm end found on most bar cues.

There are two players named Curtis. They do not sign up differently. As a result you sometimes hear, “Which Curtis? The black one or the white one?”

There are at least five guys named Michael who shoot at the Watt.

Two of them sign up as Michael. One is tall, slender and black. He always appears in full competition bicycle riding gear and stores his bike next to the spiral staircase. His bill cap is abnormally small; his numbered shirt has half length sleeves that are a different color than the shirt itself; his knee length pants fit so tight he looks as if he just left the Tour de France. The other Michael is slightly shorter, dresses in long sleeve shirt and jeans, is white with a full beard.

Mike and Mike look nothing alike. To my knowledge, they have never been in the Watt at precisely the same time so there has never been a conflict over naming rights.

Another Mike writes M on the board and actually claims that’s his name: M. Everyone ignores this; no one calls him that. No one calls out just M. It sounds like you’re humming. Everyone calls out Mike when it’s M’s turn on the table.

Many of the players bring their own sticks although some, like me, insist on using the bar cues. Why? I don’t want to own a stick because I will just lose it. It’s not so much that someone will covet and steal it, but I will walk away from it and go home and never see it again. Unless I leave it at the Watt. Downstairs below the circular staircase in a cubby hole of the basement is a place specifically designated for pool players to leave their cues until next time they are needed. Rick was sure he lost his cue at some other bar,

Before Peter acquired it, the bar was called The Firehouse. This is because it is, indeed, a former fire station. According to the Firefighter Museum, Engine Company No. 7 was located there until reassigned effective March 12, 1968, when its former quarters were deactivated. On 16th Street at the corner of Albion which is but two blocks long and might realistically be called an alley, the building was constructed in 1908 and is Edwardian by birth.

Although technically Edwardian, and the paucity of exterior gingerbread confirms this, many patrons inaccurately refer to it as a Victorian. The mid 19th Century construction style known as “balloon” gives the spacious interior 16 foot high ceilings which Peter painted black. Its 35 foot long bar runs half the length of the room, from the front door to the first pool table.

Ted has occupied the front stool for so long, Peter screwed a metal placard on the bar with his name on it. This has produced conversations that generally start as Ted returns from the bathroom or enters the bar and finds his chair occupied.

“Excuse me,” he says to the new patron. “I believe you’re in my seat.”

“Why? Is your name on the bar?”

As a matter of fact, it is.

In the rear corner just past the pool tables is a circular stair case winding its way from ceiling to basement. Who knows if it is original; it certainly lends the flavor of a 19th Century horse drawn fire brigade to the place.

There are primarily two types of pool game played at the Watt. They are bar rules or BCA and they differ dramatically. For example, bar rules are played “call your shot.” BCA is played “call your pocket.” This is no small difference and sometimes BCA is disdainfully referred to as allowing slop.

Further differences include the fact that if you scratch on the eight ball in bar rules, it is an automatic loss. Not so BCA. In BCA if you scratch on the eight ball your opponent has ball in hand, another distinction between bar and BCA rules. There is no ball in hand in bar rules, nor are there any fouls unless you scratch. In that case, the cue must be shot from the kitchen, from behind the first set of diamonds which is also said to be “from behind the line.”

In BCA there are many ways to foul. You must hit your ball first or it’s a foul; at least one ball must hit a rail or it’s a foul; when called, you cannot hit a frozen ball without a bank (If you don’t know what that means, don’t ask. It would take too long to explain.); when lining up a cue ball after the opponent has fouled, only the ferrule of the tip, not the tip itself, may touch the cue or that’s a foul.

Oh. And BCA stands for Billiard Congress of America.

There are four distinct seating areas within the Watt and the denizens of each do not necessarily meet those of the others. There is little crossover from the drinking set which sits up front and rarely passes the pool tables unless on the way to the bathrooms. Ted and Bira cross over to play pool and both are on league teams, but they can usually be found up front in seats one and two arguing with each other.

There are two booth areas, one in front near the entrance on your right as you come in and one just past the end of the bar midway in the room opposite the pool tables. In the

very back on a raised dais large enough to hold three slender tables, six stools and a little more than that many people are two dart boards.

Three booths in the midway face the pool tables. Many pool players sign up, order a drink and wait at one of these tables although the booths are just as frequently occupied by parties of people who do not play.

There is a chalk board for the dart players to keep score. It took me nearly a year to realize why the chalk kept disappearing on the pool table chalk boards: The dart people steal it.

Bira is another transplanted Brazilian. He and Diogo did not know one another before meeting at the Watt. Bira is tall and slender and wears a dressy trench coat day in and day out. He is virtually bald and always has a fedora style hat on his head. He is a good shooter, but prone to gamble. One day I saw him hatless and did not recognize him. I learned he lost a pool game to Ted in which the bet was he could not wear his hat for a week. Frankly, without a hat Bira looked like a different person.

The very last seat at the furthest end of the bar, all the way down past the curl in the corner, is invariably occupied by Motorcycle Mark. One of the patrons was face down at the bar asleep. I was talking to Mark when I noticed this and pointed at the sleeper.

“So the guy’s asleep at the bar,” Mark said. “So what? Everybody’s fallen asleep at the bar at one time in their life.”

“Not me,” I said indignant. “I’ve never spent a night in jail and I’ve never fallen asleep in a bar.”

“What?!” Mark was truly amazed. I expected him to say, “You never fell asleep at the bar,” but he didn’t. Instead he picked up one of the two bottles of beer in front of him

and drained it. Setting it down, he said “You’ve never spent a night in jail?” He sounded astonished.

Mark always orders two beers at a time. The bartender knows this and doesn’t have to be asked. This way, Mark once explained, he doesn’t have to keep ordering. Plus, it reduces the number of tips. So where anyone else might have three beers, he has six.

Mark looks like Mr. Clean with tattoos. No earring, but the same build and body morph: muscles the size of cantaloupes, broad shoulders tapering to a thin but not wasp waist. He is bald, like the Clean, but has a rat tail braid at the very back of his head which is covered by a do-rag.

I mentioned that to a friend who said a do-rag is meant to keep the sweat of your brow from falling into your eyes. I always thought it was short for “hairdo” rag.

Mark uses a lot of swear words. For example, he sometimes takes care of his boss’s dog and brings it to the bar. The creature is a huge Alaskan Malamute, about the size of a calf, its fur colored brownish white with black splotches and big, very big, paws. I remarked on this once saying something like, “Will you look at the size of those paws!”

Mark said, “Fucking goddamn shitass cocksuckin’ goddamn fuckin’ dog farts.”

Mark owns three bikes: a vintage BSA, a Honda Virago and a Harley. He does not ride any of them any more. Well, on weekends maybe. He had a DUI some years ago and never bothered to have his license renewed. He turned 45 mid-week and told me what happened that night.

Seems his longsuffering girlfriend, Sunni, wanted to take him out to dinner. He said no, let’s stay home, but she insisted, so he agreed. At the restaurant she ordered two screw drivers. Mark is primarily a beer drinker and no fan of vodka, but he relented. Just

one. Well, one turned into two, two to four and after the sixth or eighth, he does not remember exactly, they paid the tab and took a taxi home. On the way, Mark swallowed three Valium.

“Why on earth would you do that?” I asked. I like beer and it makes no sense to me to drink and take drugs. Especially on top of alcohol which I am told increases the effects of both. Think Alan Ladd. I was going to say Heath Ledger and Joaquin Phoenix, but apparently they were not drinking, just taking drugs.

Mark looked all sheepish. “It was my birthday. Usually I only take two. But it was my birthday.”

He has little or no memory of what happened next. Upstairs in the living room he passed out on his feet. As he went down, he hit the fish tank and took it crashing to the floor.

“Do you know how much water a 30 gallon tank holds?”

I knew the exact amount, but did not want to spoil the story.

Mark said Sunni tried to save the fish. He found three of them in the plugged up bathroom sink the next morning. Only one survived.

Then she tried to mop up the water which was out the door and dripping through the floor. The downstairs neighbor arrived, at first to inquire, perhaps complain, then to stay and help stem the flood.

Mark slept through all this. He did not explain where he slept, whether on the floor the whole time or maybe Sunni got him into bed. In any event, by the time he was telling me it was merely a disastrous event he was ashamed of having caused. He had to call in

his work crew to help rip up the carpet and he rented two industrial size fans to air the rooms out. It will be months, he says, before the place is back to normal.

He is not sure he wants another fish tank.

But the most startling part of the story was when Mark explained what the downstairs neighbor asked when they met in the hallway the following day.

“We still friends?”

Mark said, “Sure. Why not? What do you mean?”

“Don’t you remember telling me to get the hell out of your apartment or you were going to shoot me in the head with your 357?”

Mark was astounded. “I said that?”

I was more concerned with the truth. “Do you own a 357 magnum?”

Mark acted like it was the most natural thing. “Well, what do you think? Like, what am I going to do with a burglar in my home? Throw marbles at him?” He imitated pitching underhanded to a burglar.

Friday night at the start of the Labor Day Weekend I was at the club watching a pool game when Dan said, “I lost ten dollars to the Old Guy.” I asked who “the Old Guy” was and Dan pointed at Hugh who was lining up his next shot. Hugh has gray hair and he may be older and a grandfather, but I don’t think of him as the Old Guy. I’m older than Hugh by a couple years.

Hugh has been out of town for the last six months taking care of his mother’s estate in Mississippi. He and his sister had to figure out what to do with the bed and breakfast mom ran until she died at age 86. They rented it out to a young couple.

Dan's in his thirties, though, so to him we must look ancient. What are we doing playing pool? And beating him no less.

I don't gamble and all my opponents know this, so Huge aka the Old Guy, never even says, "Wanna play for a beer?" He knows I won't. However, he gambles and sometimes he loses. Apparently he didn't lose that night.

Next night, Saturday, I saw Hugh waiting his turn to play, his name on the board, so I sidled up and said, "Dan's still pissed he lost ten bucks to you."

"Which one's Dan?" I described him. Hugh said, "I don't know which is which because I won sixty bucks last night."

Nino was on the board waiting his turn while Nilo was shooting on the back table and when Noli walked in I just had to introduce them to each other.

I mentioned this to Jef who said, "Does that sound suspicious? Could they, perhaps, all be the same person? Wonder which one's the better pool player?"

There is an etiquette at the pool table. You sign up on the board, wait your turn and the challenger pays for the game. Peter keeps the price at the Watt half that of any other club in town. The challenger racks; the person who holds the table calls the game. It can be either bar or BCA. There is the requisite, some might say perfunctory, hand shake as the players introduce themselves before they shoot. A formal statement wishing the opponent a good game is made and the holder of the table breaks.

A girl named Elliot came in the other night. Unfamiliar with the Watt's formalities, she said, "I rack and you crack?"

I knew she knew how to shoot.

Bar rules are out of favor and BCA is the most common game called at the Kilowatt. There are several leagues that have slightly differing rules in the City. Many of the shooters at the Watt play on several teams. You may only be on one team in the BCA league, but you are allowed to be on a team in the Tavern League and the APA league at the same time.

All league teams in the City are sponsored by a club, but curiously the Kilowatt sponsors none. There is no Team Kilowatt. It is a place where good shooters go to play against one another without having the dynamics of group competition.

Aggravation at the table is a whole other aspect of the game.

* * *

“I’m so horny! I haven’t been laid in weeks!” Sarah said to no one in particular after she sank the eight ball and had a congratulatory handshake with Jay.

Sarah is a strawberry blond with a nice figure. She is a registered nurse who could work at any hospital in town. However, she prefers to wait, let the savings and unemployment run out, instead of take a shitty shift.

The Kilowatt is bike friendly as well as dog friendly. Peter installed a wide wood shelf above the door on which motorcycle riders toss their helmets when they enter.

Jay works for Pixar and at 26 is a gifted animator. One day he wants to make his own animated film. Jay commutes to Emeryville on a 2006 Yamaha YZF-R1 and it is amusing to see him take his helmet off and watch his long black Prince Valiant hair tumble out.

This outburst was typical in that when Sarah gets stoned, she gets a mouth on her. As Daniel once remarked, “Don’t get her stoned and don’t get her started”

It was the night before her wedding during the rehearsal dinner when, in a probably attributable to an alcohol fueled fit of honesty, the father of the bride leaned in toward his future son-in-law and said, “Whatever you do, don’t get Sarah stoned.”

This the lad passed over as silly. The couple found their desires enabled by wine with dinner; they occasionally had drinks at a nightclub. They might share a beer at a ball game, but had no use for herb or pharmaceuticals of any kind. Besides, in her line of work Sarah did not want to fail a piss test.

The bride danced with her father and as the wedding party wound down and most of the Champagne had been drunk, with a cigarette in one hand and a plastic replica of a long stem crystal wine glass in the other, Sarah’s brother, Josh, leaned in with garlic breath and said confidently, “Wanta smoke a doobie? You gotta get her high, man. You ain’t seen nothing until you get a little weed in her. You gotta get her stoned, man.”

What happened when Sarah got stoned was the relatively easy flow of words became a scathing torrent. The couple broke up. Sarah found herself at the Watt and learned the game.

Sam’s a medical marijuana card allowed him to frequently invite Sarah outside to the side of the building for a bowl. Since she was not working, this was a regular event. Before she began the game against Jay who held the table, Sarah had just returned from a visit with Sam. Her complaint about not having sex was not directed at anyone in particular, merely an off the top remark meant to take her mind off what was taking place in front of her.

Sarah was waiting for her challenger to get the game started. She had never met Shelly Spicer before and neither had anyone else. This was Shelly Spicer’s first time in

the bar and when the name came up at the top of the board, the incongruity of its wholeness, its completeness caught the attention of several people.

Rich and Jerz were playing on the back table when they heard Sarah call it out. They watched as Sarah waited for this Shelly Spicer to show up. Sarah called the name once more, was about to erase it when a woman stumbled forward saying, "That's me!"

Shelly Spicer was quite drunk.

Jerz waited to shoot, cue to the vertical, hands cupping the tip with his chin resting on his knuckles, watching Shelly Spicer approach Sarah who nodded, shrugged, said, "Rack 'em."

Shelly Spicer ignored this directive, raised her arm and attempted to remove her jacket. It was not a complicated act, perhaps performed many times during a day, but now it was an almost insurmountable task. Shelly Spicer was confused by having two arms in the sleeves and simply could not wring herself free. She lifted her left arm toward the ceiling and shrugged, lowered it still encased in the jacket. She lifted the right arm and made a similar maneuver, this time pulling the coat open by one zippered side. She lowered that arm without having removed any part of the coat, but now as she shrugged the jacket fell to half cover her shoulders. The wriggling went on for several seconds until Shelly Spicer finally succeeded in removing the coat which she hung -- after three failed attempts -- on a wall hook below the plate rack shelf. She stood in her jeans and dark long sleeve shirt smiling as if she had just accomplished something amazing.

Rich said, "Did you see that?"

Jerz said, "Yes. So sad."

Rich said, "Why do they let people like that play pool?"

Jerz said magnanimously, “It’s a bar. People drink.”

Rich: “She’s no match for Sarah.”

Jerz: “I know. But Sarah is . . .”

Rich finished the sentence: “Patient.”

“No,” Jerz said. “I was going to say quite capable of bludgeoning her to death with the short stick.”

The short stick rested on the Edwardian’s plate rail. Because the tables were set at an angle, this stick was necessary when the shooter was stuck in one corner. For whatever reason, Peter placed the two pool tables not flat ends toward the wall which would make them far enough away to pull back and shoot, but with a corner to the wall. This diagonal positioning occasionally required a shooter to drop their full length stick and pick up the short one, actually a bona-fide jump cue with a hard tip that was kept within easy reach on the shelf.

There are a variety of rules and regulations which pool players must abide. Some are written and some unwritten and some are merely formalities. There are rules of the game, whether bar or BCA, there are rules of conduct inside the bar, there are state liquor laws, police codes and zoning ordinances as well as Laws of the Universe to which pool is peculiarly susceptible.

There are two rules posted on the wall below the framed dog photos. One reads: “House Rule #1 -- If you spoof the ball you must put 25 cents in the bucket!!! Make an eight ball break & the bucket is yours!”

There is one other posted rule which reads: “No doubles on either pool table. Thanks.” The reason for this is several fold. These are serious pool players. Couples tend

not to be. One is usually trying to teach the other and their games last longer than the last ice age which is simply a no-no at the Watt. You come in after you have the skill set down pat.

A third rule should be posted: “No cell phones allowed when you are shooting. Period. Amen. Get it?” I wrote that.

The bucket hangs above the first table at about the ten foot level. In order to put a quarter in the bucket, players learn to turn the cue upside down, place a quarter on the butt end which is a rubber bumper almost exactly the size of the coin, and raise the cue very gingerly and lean it in to the bucket and bump. There have been those who, when it is explained they owe a quarter to the bucket and should use a cue stick to put it there, attempt to place the coin on the tip end which, at 12 mm is about the size of a dime.

At five feet eight, when Diogo spoofs a ball he pulls out a quarter, takes a three step running leap and drops it like a basketball through the hoop.

Diogo gets the eight on the break rather often. In order to take down the bucket he climbs a bar stool. He once got nothing but two dimes and a nickel and, inexplicably, a brassiere out of the bucket.

When James spoofs a ball, he walks over to the bucket, reaches up and drops the coin in.

Until I entered the Kilowatt, I had never heard the word “spoofer” used quite this way. To me it meant you were making fun, you were joshing, you were spoofing me. A couple of Australians showed up one night and read the sign and started sniggering. They told me in OZ spoofing is masturbation. Or maybe it’s the result of having masturbated. I didn’t quite catch which, nor did I want them to clarify it for me.

On the other hand, as much as \$40 has fallen out in small change. It is customary but not demanded that the winner of the bucket pay for the next game. That's because the opponent still gets to play having suffered an automatic loss on the break. And if you break and run the table, it is also customary to allow your opponent to pay to play once more. One night Guy did that to me twice before I got to shoot the third time I racked.

The City has laws which the Watt must follow. Firemen sometimes show up at night in full regalia to be sure the place is not exceeding its proper patron level. Police rarely come in because it's not that kind of place. There have been instances, however. One night Jared was so stoned or drunk or both he became belligerent and the bar tender 86'd him. He was so fat, when he passed out on the floor two men had to drag him out by his feet and the cops were called. He has not been back.

There are also universal laws by which the patrons must abide. Never rest a pint glass of beer on the table or the table rail. Fighting is not allowed inside and you cannot take a cue with you if you decide to go outside. Of course this behavior is frowned upon in particular and most people know the maxim my Pappy taught me: "Never hit anything hard with your fist, especially someone's head." If you do get in a fight, both you and the other person are permanently evicted from the club.

Then there are the rules of serendipity. Jerz sometimes makes absurd shots involving two rails and a kick which means hitting a ball from behind, not the front. You have to hit your own ball first in BCA, or that's a foul. If he manages somehow to hit two rails and his ball, that ball or the cue has to hit a rail or it's a foul. Getting kicked from behind means a ball is unlikely to land in the specified pocket. When it does, when Jerz

calls the pocket and it goes where he pointed as has happened numerous times, Jerz can be heard to murmur, “Ahhh. The Pool Gods must be smiling.”

Of course, Jerz is also the one who says, “Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Sometimes you lose all night.”

Here is one Law of the Universe as it applies to pool: If you sign up on both boards, your name will come up at the same time; you will miss your turn on one and go to the bottom of the list. This is true even if you try and defy the Pool Gods and wait for six other people to sign up before you add your name on the other table. The Law of the Universe reads “When your name comes up on one board, it will come up on the other.”

An unwritten rule is while you are waiting to play, get quarters. There is a change machine in the corner next to the juke box. Nothing is more annoying than waiting for someone to rack who has no coins, doesn’t know there is a change machine and is three rows deep waving a fiver at the bartender.

Well, yes, there is one more annoying thing to wait for. Smoking is not allowed in any bar in the state. I hate waiting for someone who holds the table go outside for a smoke. I rack, I wait. Iran. Irate.

Here is another example of etiquette: When you call out a name, but no one comes forth, don’t just erase it. Write that name at the bottom of the list and continue calling until someone steps up. That way when a belligerent drunken fool arrives two games later and says, “You skipped me!” you can point to the bottom of the board and explain the name was called, but no one answered. Everyone in the place will back you up.

Kendra has not been in the bar for three weeks, yet her name comes up every night left over from the day before.

Shelly Spicer turned toward Sarah and asked, “What are we waiting for?”

Sarah said, “You. I’m waiting for you to put your quarters in.”

Shelly Spicer said with a certain amount of drunken incredulity, “What? It costs money to play?”

John P, Sam and Danny sat on stools to the side of the chalk board. All three shook their heads in dismay.

Shelly Spicer seemed momentarily puzzled, then reached in both pockets, pulled them inside out and said, “I don’t have any money.”

“Then you can’t play,” Sarah said pointedly.

As I said earlier, Peter keeps the price of a game at half that anywhere else in the City. On Sundays the tables are free. All this draws players, of course, and beer sales are boosted in direct proportion to the number of shooters in the room.

“Anybody got a quarter? Can I bum a quarter?” Shelly Spicer turned toward the onlookers with open palm.

Ordinarily the bystanders are not adverse to ponying up, but in this case all three shook their heads no. They hoped Shelly Spicer would just go away.

Oddly enough, after a second, Danny said in his Irish brogue, ““Here ya go lass,” and put two quarters on the rail just above the coin slot. “Let’s get this show on the road.” The devilish side of his Catholic upbringing had sprung forth.

Shelly Spicer hovered in front of the table making no attempt to place the coins in the slot. She asked, “Who breaks? Me or you because I’m not good at that.”

There was a collective groan from the bystanders.

Sarah said, “I break. You rack. Put your money in or get the fuck out of here.”

Shelly Spicer reacted like she had been slapped in the face. Her eyes sprang wide, her head bobbed back. But she said nothing and bent and inserted and pushed and the balls began tumbling into the holder. Shelly Spicer began placing them one by one on the felt. Sarah, annoyed, walked behind and pulled the triangle from its slot and dropped it over the four balls that had been retrieved.

“Maybe this’ll help.”

At last, Shelly Spicer lifted the triangle and Sarah inspected it to see if the balls were tight. She noted the eight ball was in its proper position, but switched a stripe for a solid in one corner, dropped the triangle over all the balls and said, “We’re playing BCA rules. That’s the BCA rack. Now tighten it and we can begin.”

Shelly Spicer did as she was told and Sarah shook hands saying, “I’m Sarah. You’re Shelly Spicer. Good luck.”

Sarah broke. The balls flew apart without any dropping. “Your shot,” she told Shelly Spicer.

Another etiquette: You are not allowed to take some other person’s game even if they give you permission. If a name comes up on the board and that person does not want to play, you cannot take their name. The name next in line is up and you wait your turn like everyone else. Nor are you supposed to erase someone and substitute your name, again even with their permission, although this is not really enforced. And there is the etiquette of shaking hands before the break. You say to your opponent something like, “good game,” “good luck” or, in some instances just to be funny, “I hope you lose.”

Shelly Spicer looked puzzled. She was perplexed by what she was supposed to do next. She made a big show of going over to where the cues are hung and picked up one

after another looking down them to see if they were straight, hefting them individually to feel their weight and because the break was spread throughout the table, Shelly Spicer placed each cue one at a time in the center of the table and rolled it. None satisfied her. She at last selected one and as soon as it was evident she had a stick she wanted, it was also perfectly clear to everyone she did not know how to use it.

A pool cue has a balance point easily found by sliding both hands together, palms facing with the cue lying in the webbing between thumbs and index fingers. Experienced players find this spot automatically. This is the place where a cue is lightly held by the fingertips, elbow bent for easy straightforward thrust. The top side of the cue shaft rests on the other hand in a variety of positions called “the bridge.” Your hand makes a bridge which can be the index finger curled around the shaft and three fingers on the table or the shaft resting between index and thumb or, in Noah’s unique and unusual case, the tip end held between index and forefinger in the V of the Peace Sign.

Shelly Spicer had no bridge to speak of and no idea how to swing her arm with any prospect of making the cue ball collide with the object ball, let alone sink something. As Shelly Spicer fumbled with her stick, Sarah clearly grew more impatient.

Sarah rarely raised her voice. Her style was to take a stance with one hand on her hip, a leg bent slightly and her body tilted toward the object of her taunt to emphasize her words. She said, “You call yourself a human bean?”

Either Shelly Spicer did not hear over the hubbub or did not understand the question. Nor did she know how to find equilibrium on the stick. She gripped the butt with her palm encasing the round rubber stop. Her fist held the stick tightly instead of fingertips holding lightly with palm hovering over it. She got down with her chin nearly

resting on the table, one eye closed, the other looking down the barrel which is not such a bad technique, and wobbled the stick from side to side as she aimed, which is bad technique. When at last she shot, she lost her balance and pitched forward onto the table.

Needless to say, her shot missed.

Sarah made two stripes in a row, called a third ball in the side pocket and it went off another which is quite legal under BCA rules. In BCA you call the pocket, not the shot, and it doesn't matter how many balls or rails the ball you nominated hits, even if it goes up and back. So long as it falls in the pocket the shooter called, it's fair.

The distinction between shots and pockets is wide and cavernous. It is also quite misunderstood by casual players as Shelly Spicer obviously was. Sarah proceeded to line up her next shot and Shelly Spicer went ballistic.

"You didn't call that!" she shouted. "You hit my ball. You didn't call that shot!"

Sarah withdrew from her position on the table, stood and glared at her opponent. "BCA rules. We're playing BCA which I told you in the beginning before we even got started. Remember?"

Shelly Spicer did not remember the conversation, probably had not understood what Sarah meant, but because she did not want to demonstrate ignorance, said nothing at the time. Now she started calling Sarah a cheat.

Sarah said, "Suck my dick!" She grabbed her crotch and made thrusting motions.

Shelly Spicer was astonished by this behavior. The onlookers expected nothing less from Sarah who added, "It amuses me to see what annoys you."

The bar was half full with a line of people ordering drinks. There were a lot of newcomers, few of whom heard the exchange over the music which was loud -- Iggy and the Stooges -- and conversations had to be shouted to be heard.

But the regulars heard and understood what was happening.

Khanh was born in Vietnam. Her father was already in the United States when, in 1978 at age three, she and her mother and sisters and several aunts managed to get aboard an over crowded smuggler's boat. She remembers losing a flip-flop on the beach running to get aboard and not being allowed to stop and retrieve it. After nearly capsizing in a storm, they were picked up and taken to Manila where they spent a year in a refugee camp before being allowed to emigrate and fly to the States. Khanh spent her youth in Southern California and when she came out, moved north to the West Coast Mecca for gays and lesbians. But her mother doesn't want to hear this and Khanh has to hide the coffee table books whenever mom comes to town which, thankfully, is not often. Khanh is barely five feet tall, but her pool shooting skills make her a formidable opponent. Her shots are deliberate and well thought out, so much so she frequently runs the table.

Khanh said, "You don't know what you're talking about. Sarah doesn't cheat."

Jerz and Rich were no longer interested in their own game. Jerz said, "She just sucks the good karma right out of the room."

In a trice, Rich's dog was jumping up and down trying to lick Jerz's face. "Down Karma, I'm not food."

Dave, who is president of the Tavern League and hosts the website sfpool.com, approached with a beer in his hands. "Nope. We don't abide that. Cheaters never prosper."

Sam L. was right there with his video camera, but Shelly Spicer did not seem to realize she was the focus of so much attention.

Calmed by Jay's soothing voice as he also explained it was a legal shot, Shelly Spicer allowed the game to continue.

Sarah lined up and Shelly Spicer moved to stand in front of the pocket. She began weaving from side to side like a metronome, stick in hands with butt to the floor. Perhaps influenced by her opponent's antics, Sarah missed.

Shelly Spicer's next shot was wild. She skipped the cue ball into the air where it danced on the rail ledge before falling to the floor. There was silence until Rick said, "You owe a quarter to the bucket."

Shelly Spicer paid no attention. She retrieved the ball, handed it to Sarah who was allowed to place it anywhere on the table.

Again, Shelly Spicer was outraged. "What are you doing!?! You have to shoot from behind the line. You're cheating!"

Mark said, "Nooooo. She gets to put the ball where she wants because you knocked it off the table."

Shelly Spicer refused to believe these people were not lying or cheating her, but she became quiet as Sarah stroked her arm back and forth preparatory to taking her next shot. Shelly Spicer began singing, "Yo Ho Ho and a Bottle of Rum" and stuck her nose down next to the pocket in what was generally considered a display of bad form. Then she dropped her cue which crashed loudly on the floor.

Sarah missed.

Shelly Spicer said, “Hah!” and began lining up her next shot. The tip of her cue flipped into the air and clipped the metal light shade dangling over the table. Shelly Spicer steadied this with an unsteady hand. She shot, missed and said, “Shit!”

This time Shelly Spicer hovered over Sarah’s pocket hopping from one foot to the other. Sarah concentrated. She was not going to miss a third time and the shot was excellent.

Her antics failed, but Shelly Spicer got her nose down to the felt at the edge of the pocket and looked straight at Sarah in another obvious attempt to influence the game.

Sarah potted her fifth ball.

Shelly Spicer went over to the chalk board and began wiping the names using the palms of her hands rotated in circles. The bystanders shouted all at once, “Hey! Stop that!” but it was too late. Most of the names were no longer legible. This could be fixed, but it caused a considerable amount of concern until they saw what Shelly Spicer did next: Crossing her hands on her chest, she placed the open palms on her breasts, patted and pulled them back. The dark shirt over each breast was covered with chalk in the shape of a handprint and Sarah started laughing so hard she muffed her next shot as well.

This may have been a display of bad sportsmanship, but it was great video. Sam L got up close with his camera and as he backed away got reaction shots from the crowd. Shelly Spicer proudly displayed her chalk covered tits. She must have felt vindicated. If she was not making her own balls fall, she was at least preventing Sarah from making hers.

Shelly Spicer held her cue horizontally in the air and took a victory stance. The crowd sat silent.

Motorcycle Mark at the end of the bar across the room started applauding. He shouted, “Fucking goddamn shitass cocksuckin’ goddamn fuckin’ idiot!”

Shelly Spicer looked shocked. She did not move her arm, but lowered the cue and lifted a leg and cracked the cue in half over her knee.

“Oh no ya don’t. You can’t fool me.” Sarah quipped calmly. “You’re really a toad masquerading as a goat wearing a suit.”

The guys sitting on the sideline were outraged. The destruction of equipment was an offense of incredible magnitude. Tips might wear out, chalk has to be replaced, the felt on the tables needed to be recovered annually, but no one was allowed to destroy the equipment on purpose.

Chadwick the bouncer was called over. He asked what was going on and Rich explained what had just happened. Meanwhile, Shelly Spicer surreptitiously lifted her coat from below the plate rail and slowly, almost soberly, put it on. Before Chadwick could be convinced to act, either to have her 86’d or charge her with the price of a pool cue, Shelly Spicer glided toward the front door.

No one challenged her, most likely because none could believe what they had just seen. Shelly Spicer disappeared into the night and was never seen at the Kilowatt again.

#

