



SHOOT-OUT IN JOHNSTON CITY . . . *in which -- after all the hustlers have traded lies and shots -- Wimpy and Fast Eddie are left standing to play some no-forgiveness pool.*

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There are some worlds in which the spoken truth isn't welcome or necessary. Professional pocket billiards is one. In a room with a pool table and a couple of hustlers, the truth is a silly abstraction. Around high-stakes pool, everybody lies about everything, to everyone, loudly or quickly, but nonstop and with style.

And it works. A tight society of pool hustlers -- the best 100 or so players in the country -- hangs together, perpetuates itself, sees very many arguments, very few fights, makes inside jokes, has a jargon of its own, maintains a grapevine, works around a common gaggle of superstitions, has gentlemen and drunks. Young Turks and old pros, fat times and skinny, Rembrandts and Walter Keanes, watches new people arrive and old ones die.

The reason it can exist on a billion little lies is that the single unspoken truth it honors is the only one for which it scores points: That's Euclid's truth -- Newton's truth. Poke the cue ball at the right angle (there's Euclid) and the object ball drops (that's Newton). One point.

The lies after all, are designed only to get you a game:

"My game's off. I been sick."

"Yeah, well, I been up four days straight. I'm dead. I'd go to bed but I can't find my hotel."

"You shoot good tired."

"Well I'm drunk too."

"You shoot even better drunk."

"Hell, I can't even see the table. I'm blind for Christ sakes."

“Yeah, and you shoot good blind.”

“Listen, I’m drunk, I’m tired, I’m sick. I’m having trouble with my old lady -- and I’ll spot you three balls.”

“All right, rack ’em.”

“Bastard.”

The lies get you into the game, but only the truth gets the hell out with the money. Chalk, shoot, think, bank shot, roll, chalk, work the rack, chalk, shoot, until someone goes home with the truth in his pocket. All rolled up in a rubber band. Some go home with just the rubber band, and some lose that too.

It’s the little lies that get the press -- but only because they’re so damn much fun. The truth about professional pocket billiards is its own classic and subtle drama which is built around a set of skills that takes a lifetime to master. The observer’s problem is that for every hour these men spend learning to play, they spend two hours learning to talk crooked about it.

Pool tournaments are a mixture of the truth and the lies. In the official games only the score means anything and it’s guarded by a referee, a scorekeeper and a standings poster. But the side games, the unofficial afternoon or late night action is generated by the network of lies. The hustlers meet for tournament play four or five times a year. There’s the Stardust tournament in Las Vegas for \$35,000, the Johnston City meet for \$20,000, the Billiard Congress for \$20,000, and usually one or two others to get the sharks off their home tables in Houston, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles or Philly, and get them together to work on one another. Because notoriety precedes most of these men into the pool halls across the country, the only real action they can get is among themselves.

The Johnston City, Illinois, World’s All-Round Pocket Billiards Championship is the oldest of the pro tournaments. Paulie and George Jansco started it 11 years ago in a room they’d built behind their Show Bar. That was in 1950 and pool was at its lowest ebb. The pros had of course, been playing all along, but for 20 years things had been lean -- so lean that some hustlers had even learned a trade.

About 1940, pool halls around the country had begun to close for lack of business. Before that, pool in America had seen its golden age between about 1920 and 1930. Those were the salad days of guys like Al Miller. He was on the road at 14, hustling for a living and pocket billiards was a dude’s game.

“I remember about 1918, I was a teenager and got my first tailor-made Rambeau. Beautiful thing, cost \$7.50. Rambeau was the best cue you could get. Still is, and a lot of guys use ’em. Course, Old Man Rambeau’s dead, but they’re still making the sticks. Back then, you could really hustle. Not that you can’t today but then . . . well, a lot of things was different. Around ’30, ’31, I was really shooting. I won four tournaments in Chicago and a couple in Philly and in ’32, I won the national. The halls were different then. They were like palaces. There was this one place in Detroit that had, like, 144 tables and girls racking the balls. And these places were for gentlemen only. You’d go in and a girl would take your hat and you had to sit down and be quiet, and pretty soon you’d get a table. The place was done in royal purple with brass rails and fittings everywhere and during the day you could get away with a sweater with velveteen sleeves. But at night, you had to have a tux. Only games we played then were Straight Pool and Rotation. There was no Nine-ball or One-pocket or even Eight-ball then. And the balls were Zanzibar ivory, much heavier, and you really had to smack ’em to move ’em around.”

By 1939, pool had a rotten name. It mattered little that the best of the players wore tuxedos and behaved like gentlemen. The public knew that there was a lot of gambling and cigar smoking and hoods who liked the game. When the War came, professional pocket billiards nearly disappeared.

Then, in 1961, *The Hustler* came out. That movie, along with the Jansco brothers and Rudolph Wanderone ("Minnesota Fats") put it all back together. The second golden age of pool began. It was more widespread this time; there was less cigar smoking, and pool halls with names like Town and Country Billiards even began to attract the ladies.. The heroes turned out to be pretty much the same men who'd been the best 20 years before: Al Miller, Luther Lassiter, Irving Crane, and 20 or 30 others. But there were some flashy kids too -- Danny Jones, Eddie Kelly, Ronnie Allen -- and there was television and a new generation hungry for sports to watch and play.

In 1961, the first year of the Johnston City tournament, 13 guys showed up. "Mostly to catch George and me" says Paulie, "but we was tired of losing, so we let 'em have each other." Every year, the prize money and the entries grew. The Janscos added another big room, and then the hustlers really came -- like piranhas after some poor cow that wandered into the wrong river -- but only to find one another. By 1963, the field was illustrious enough to bring ABC's *Wide World of Sports* to cover it. The beer and bourbon -- standard playing equipment -- had to be served in paper cups, and the lights were a little hot, but ego runs high around the hustlers, and ABC went back for five years in a row.

The Johnston City tournament has more pool action than the Las Vegas get-together (which Paulie Jansco also runs, for the Stardust hotel). In Vegas, when two hustlers begin the courting ritual that's designed to get them into a side game with the right odds, negotiations are likely to break down early and the two usually end up laughing together and losing their money -- not to each other but to the house in a game of craps. Johnston City however, is a coal-mining town of 3,400 people so thoroughly tucked away from everything on the southern Illinois flatlands that to get there you have to fly into St. Louis, Missouri, 100 miles west. The three October weeks that the hustlers spend in town are more likely to be rainy and the only things to do are drink and play pool. The two are far from mutually exclusive and Paulie Jansco has them both sewed up.

The press always shows up in Johnston City. Over the three weeks they drift in and out, talking to the players ("How old were you when you started to hustle?"), buttonholing Paulie ("Whatever gave you the idea to start a hustlers' tournament?"), searching for whatever's left of Damon Runyon in America, looking for the color, trying to find out if "Boston Shorty" is really short and "Handsome Danny Jones" really handsome. Paulie knows what they're after, and when they sit with him in the Show Bar, sipping Scotch or beer while he sips coffee (if it's before five P.M.), they can't write fast enough. Paulie is a reservoir of pool stories about the great pool hustlers.

"We like the hustlers," he says. "We don't cater to Straight Pool players so much or any particular branch of pool. But the hustlers are the best. This year Allen's here, Kelly's here. They're probably the two best all-around players in the world. Lassiter's here too, and it's hard to bet against him. He's won three all-around tourneys and has a good chance to win this one. Danny Jones is here; he's the defending champ, but he's got a crick in his neck this year. All the hustlers are here. They come looking for each other and the action is pretty good. The other night, two of them flipped a coin for \$2,400; \$4,800 takedown. The one that lost the flip immediately challenged the other to a game of Nine-ball for \$2,000, which he also lost. He had a bad day.

"I get along with the hustlers because I understand them. But they're temperamental as hell. You think movie stars are temperamental -- ha, get around some pool players. They got be the world's worse. I got a good example -- I got 500 examples -- but the year before last, Joey Spades was in Las Vegas. Now, in Vegas we get, like, 140 entries, double elimination, three divisions, and we have to play it off in 17 days, which means you got to play day and night. But Spades says, "Don't put me on in the daytime." I say, "Why not?" and he says, "I can't bend my finger around the cue in the daytime. I can only bend my finger around the cue at night.' So I look around and there's no open windows or doors in the place and so I say, "How do you know

whether it's day or night when there's no doors or windows and we operate strictly by electric light?" and he says to me in his most serious voice, 'My finger knows.'

"And anytime a player loses, it's never his fault. He was never outplayed and he never played bad. He'll tell you the lights were bad or the table was bad or the atmospheric conditions were bad -- like some kind of weatherman."

"They're a crazy bunch. *Really* nuts some of them. And they drink a lot. Some of them never get sober. But I've seen those guys where they were bumping into the corners of the table walking around it, couldn't see the ground, and they'll still shoot your eyes out. It's a hard way to live, making money off a pool table, and it does funny things to a guy's head. Most of my best friends are pool hustlers, but I still tell people when I get hot, 'If I was a witch, I'd turn you into a pool hustler.' They're different from other people. They just want to be pool players. Take Al Miller -- he's a master electrician, but he don't work at it. He's content to be poor -- not dirt poor, not most of the time -- but you know, poor, and he has no ambition at all except to play pool."

And someone always asks, "Where's Minnesota Fats?"

"Fatty? Oh hell, who knows. He was one of the instigators of this tournament and he played in the first couple, but he's so busy with his exhibitions and television and his corporations that he usually doesn't show up around tournament time. He lives about 20 miles from here, and we've been friends since '39. He is the king of hustlers, no question, and I don't mean just pool. He's a born hustler, a fabulous person.

"I'll tell you who Fats is. He's got a Cadillac and the whole trunk is full of clippings, stories about him; you write something about him he'll buy a thousand copies. Anyway, when he and his wife go on a trip, they have to take two cars, 'cause there's no room for luggage in Fats' trunk and he won't leave those clippings behind. One time he stopped at the side of the road and some guy was plowing a field. He got him over, introduced himself and he's showing this farmer his clippings. He's amazing. He and his big mouth have done more for this sport than anything.

"He's also the best bite man in the world; better on the snap than anybody. He'll borrow some money from you and make you go out and get some more so you can give it to him. I'll tell you a funny story about him and Al Miller. We're in Norfolk and every day Fats bites Miller for a hundred. Every single day for six weeks. Well, there was this big crap game and Fatty got his tit in a ringer one night and he loses \$4,800. Next day Al is there and we're talking about Fats losing \$4,800 and Miller really gets hot. He says, 'That son of a bitch he's been getting \$100 a day from me for six weeks to eat on and you mean he had \$4,800 to lose in that crap game?' So now he's looking for fats; he's going to punch Fats in the nose. He's standing there in front of the poolroom for about two hours just burning, and naturally, we're rubbing it in. Miller's so mad he can't see anymore. He says, 'As soon as the fat man comes I'm going to run over and fix his nose good!' So Fatty drives up and Miller runs over, opens the door and jumps in the car and they sit there for about 20 minutes. Then they get out and Miller's walking real dejectedly back towards us. We asked him what happened. 'The son of a bitch bit me for another hundred,' he says. You got to be a king to do that kind of thing,"

"Is that stuff true?"

"Is it true?" says Paulie, "What did they send me, the religion editor?"

"Listen, the match tonight is going to be one of the best of the tournament. One-pocket finals; Lassiter against Allen. That's going to be pretty pool. There ought to be a good crowd, because both these guys are popular. Ronnie Allen's from L.A. and he's flashy. Walks around the table talking to the crowd, laughing, making jokes, very colorful, dresses in that Mod style. And he's very good. He's favored and he ought to win. Young as he is, he shoots beautiful pool. His nickname is Fast Eddie, you know, like the movie. Everybody gets a kick out of him.

“Luther’s going to be way over his head against Allen in One-pocket. In Nine-ball or Straight Pool, Lassiter would eat Allen alive, but in One-pocket it ought to be the other way around. But it’ll be a good match. Luther’s a pro, he’s been playing for 38 years and when he goes down into that pit, he goes to shoot. No matter what, there’ll be some no-forgiveness One-pocket pool in there tonight.

“One-pocket’s a very specialized game. Very tough. Each player picks one pocket -- either the right or the left at the top of the table [the foot spot end] -- and then whoever gets eight balls in his pocket first, wins. What happens is it turns into a very tight defensive game, because any one of these guys could sink eight balls in seven seconds if they had open shots. So the trick is to keep your opponent from having a shot. You hide the cue ball: behind the pack, on the wrong rail, anywhere you can. Just so you leave the other guy nasty. That’s called playing it safe. It’s maybe the toughest game in pocket billiards, because you have to know how to shoot, bank, play combinations, perfect position; and hardest of all, you have to know how to shoot a safety. It’s a nervous game, gives every body those sneak-up kind of heart attacks. It’s beautiful.”

He was right. When the big room opened at 7:30, the crowd was there. It took the 500 or so of them about five minutes to bunch through the double doors and find seats in the grandstand that surrounds the pit on three sides. Those who couldn’t get seats stood and sat in the stairway aisles. The rest stood on chairs behind the grandstand.

In the pit, two very green, brand-new billiard tables with special overhead lights were getting a final careful brushing (with the nap of the green felt, called Simonis number one).

Behind the tables, up out of the pit on the side without a grandstand, some of the hustlers were drifting over to get a piece of standing room or a seat at the long folding table with the trophies on it. Behind that on the wall hung a huge elimination chart with the record of three weeks of pool on it. It looked like the professional pocket billiards’ family tree running nearly floor to ceiling, with all the great pool hustlers paired off against each other: “Handsome Danny” Jones, “Cuban Joe” Valdez, “Cicero” Murphy, Marvin Henderson, Al Miller, “Cincinnati Joey” Spaeth, “Champagne Eddie” Kelly, Eddie “Knoxville Bear” Taylor, Jack “Jersey Red” Breit, Al Coslowsky, Joe “the Butcher” Balsis, Billy “the Kid” Cardone, Joe Russo, Richie Florence, Bill “Weenie Beanie” Staton, Larry “Boston Shorty” Johnson, all dovetailing to the left until only six names were repeated, then four, then two: Luther “Wimpy” Lassiter and Ronnie “Fast Eddie” Allen, hanging one above the other with only a single line next to them to fill.

Allen came in the back door from the general direction of a marathon gin rummy game, walked through the milling hustlers in front of the trophy table and began laughing and saying hi and looking around at the crowd. His Mod clothes -- flared pants, body shirt with loose long sleeves and long pointed collar -- all were a contrast to the other players’. So was his age -- around 30. Perched on top of his head, above an Our Gang-comedy face, was a vermilion corduroy cap that said even before he opened his mouth that he was insanely cocky.

The betting had started in the crowd even before Allen had arrived. Now it began among the hustlers. The odds were on Allen seven to five. Allen’s entourage -- three or four madras-bell-bottom-Mod-mustachioed L.A. friends -- was doing the negotiating and holding the money. Allen overheard a conversation in the front row between two guys trying to make a bet. He leaned over and said to the one who wanted Lassiter, “You want to bet? I’ll take your bet. What do you want?”

“Seven to five on a hundred.”

“Seven to five?” Allen is shouting now (the liar’s tone). “Man do you know who I’m playing? I’m playing Lassiter -- Luther Lassiter -- and you want seven to five?”

His pigeon, unconvinced, held firm. “I want seven to five.”

“Take it,” said Allen over his shoulder to one of his moneymen, a guy in square-toed shoes.

Lassiter had stepped quietly through the crowd now and into the pit. He looked, as he always does, more like a troubled stockbroker than the seven-time champion of the world in Straight Pool. White shirt, dark tie, gray sports coat and short-cropped white hair -- whiter than it should be at 50 years. There was some scattered applause as the crowd noticed him, but he didn’t look up. He took his Balabushka cue out of the case, twisted the two halves together, slid the case under table number one and sat down without a word on a stool in a corner of the pit. He sat there for five minutes (while the chatter and the betting continued) with one foot on the ground, and one foot on the crossbar, head tilted to the left and not moving: an overly calm portrait in a room that by now had the decorum of an auction barn.

A moment later, Paulie Jansco stepped into the pit and the room quieted, except for some coughing and a few last-minute bets. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said “welcome to the ninth annual World’s All-Round Pocket Billiards Championship. We’ve already crowned a Straight Pool champion in Joe Russo and a Nine-ball champion in Mr. Luther Lassiter. Tonight we’ll crown a One-pocket champ in either Ronnie ‘Fast Eddie’ Allen of Burbank, California, or Luther ‘Wimpy’ Lassiter of Elizabeth City, North Carolina. The best four out of seven games will win.”

A referee is in the pit and the lights over table two have been turned off, Lassiter is still sitting quietly, eating ice out of a paper cup. As Paulie leaves the pit, Allen takes his arm and says,

“Wait a minute, wait -- wait -- wait. He ain’t getting his choice of the table.”

“All right, we’ll flip for it,” says Paulie.

“OK, that’s fine, but you don’t give the choice away, for Christ sakes.”

Paulie tosses a quarter, Allen wins and says, “The other table.” The referee sets two cue balls on it and Allen and Lassiter step up to lag.

Allen scrunches the cap into place on the back of his head, and then, smiling, he asks, “May I lag Mr. Lassiter?”

“Yes sir,” says Lassiter in his quiet voice, “I hope it’s your pleasure.”

Lassiter wins, a rack of balls is set on the spot, he sights along his cue then takes a gentle break shot that pushes the pack towards the upper right pocket and leaves the cue ball nearly on the lip of the left-hand pocket, where Allen will have no shot except a safety. Allen is on the stool and engaged in a giggly, whispered conversation with two of his friends in the front row.

“Your shot, Mr. Allen,” says the referee.

He walks quickly to the table, looks briefly, bends, takes one stroke to line his shot up, and then pushes the cue ball through the pack, off the 6, off the 3, and leaves it buried on Lassiter’s side. A nearly perfect safe. There is a slight applause as he returns to the stool, a cigarette, a drink, and his conversation.. Lassiter walks to the table and around it slowly. He is taking deep breaths, blinking and shaking his head back and forth. There are two possible shots, but not very possible. He stands still, chalking his cue, taking both shots in his head. The only sound is Allen’s animated whispering. Lassiter walks on the other side of the table, takes another deep breath, then seems conscious of the time he’s taking and says softly, “This boy’s a genius -- this boy is the best player in the world.”

Allen turns, smiling. "You want to bet on me, Mr. Lassiter, sir?"

Lassiter is still looking. He bends, strokes two or three times, and then says, "No sir, I would not," and pokes a safe shot along the high rail. Allen is up and to the table. He looks, bends, shoots and walks quickly back to the stool.

"Fast Eddie," says Lassiter, looking at the table again and shaking his head. "Boy, I wish you'd put me out of my misery." After a moment he plays safe, and there is applause. He's put Allen in a very bad spot.

Allen, at the table, looking at the trap he's in, says, "Very pretty." There is no shot and almost no way for him to play safe. Lassiter, on the stool, drops a cube of ice in his mouth and watches, Allen plays a table-long bank, down the rail and back up into the middle of the pack -- where the cue ball buries itself. There is applause, the loudest of it coming from around the trophy table, where the other hustlers are watching a game they're glad they're not in. Allen has escaped the trap and left Lassiter in a worse one.

At the table again, shaking his head again, Lassiter looks for 30 seconds and then says, "I wish I had Daddy Warbuck's head on my shoulders right now." Herbert Cokes -- Daddy Warbucks -- is sitting on a folding chair in front of the cluster of hustlers, shaking his head no.

"I'm glad you recognize talent when you see it, Luther," says Allen from the stool.

"Oh, don't worry, I can tell from that cap alone, my boy, says Lassiter without looking up from his studies. There is laughter and Allen, smiling, tips his cap. Lassiter's looking at a bank combination. It's not a shot he wants to take, because a miss will leave the table to Allen. He bends in to shoot it, then straightens up again and chalks his cue nervously, then bends again and takes the shot. The cue ball leaves the pack, hits the rail, then rolls back into the pack where the 5-ball breaks out and runs for the hole. There is yelling and clapping before the ball drops, which it does. Allen is smiling, pounding his cue butt on the floor. Cokes is leaning forward in his chair, eyes shut, clapping, the crowd is still applauding and some of them are on their feet. Lassiter is smiling and looking at the table for his next shot.

His position is good and now he begins to work on the tight pack of balls like a gourmet over a duck. He breaks the 2-ball off the corner of the pack and straight in on a hair-thin cut, then the 3 straight in, then a bank on the 11, the 6 up the rail and in, the 4 on a bank and then a pause.

"Mr. Lassiter, shooting for two," says the referee.

Lassiter is looking at a bank shot on the 15-ball. An easy shot, but there's nothing afterward. He sinks it and then shoots a safety. There is applause as he sits down.

"Mr. Lassiter needs one ball to win," says the referee.

Allen is up. He looks carefully at the table, moves around it, then leans over the 7-ball and puts his eye very close to it to see if it is touching the rail. The referee moves around, bends over it and says, "Not frozen."

"Yeah, thanks, I know," says Allen, "for all the good it does me." Then he banks the cue ball the length of the table; it comes back and kicks the 7 a foot and in. There is wild applause and some spilling of drinks. This is the magic the crowd has come to see. Allen has an opening now and, unlike Lassiter -- who usually sinks a ball here and a ball there, between safes -- Allen's style of play is called runout. Given an opening, he can sink the eight balls he needs to win without a miss.

He turns to the crowd now and announces, "The blitz is on." And then with almost no hesitation between shots, he banks the 8 in, pokes the 1 straight in, the 13 along the rail, the 10 straight in, the 9 on a cut, the 14 straight in, and then the 12 on a bank rolls toward the hole, bangs the rail and hangs up on the lip of his pocket. The sound of disappointment from the crowd.

Allen is smiling. He steps back and says, "Should have had a hamburger." The winning ball is alone on the table in the upper left corner.

Despite the miss, there is no real shot for Lassiter. He is chalking, looking at the table. The one ball that's left is dangerously close to Allen's pocket and open only to a difficult cross bank. If he makes it, he's likely to scratch. If he doesn't he'll leave it for Allen.

"Don't miss," says Allen. And then as Lassiter takes the shot gently, the ball comes off the rail and runs towards his pocket. Allen stretches off his stool and says, "Will it go?"

"It will, my boy, it will," says Lassiter. It does. The gallery is on its feet, clapping, and the hustlers are clapping, shaking their heads, laughing, exchanging money. Allen is smiling and shaking his head back and forth.

And the rest of the seven-game match followed the same rhythm -- Lassiter refusing to leave anything open, playing very tight and then making shots where there weren't any. One here, then safe for five minutes, then another, until finally there were eight down. Allen became quieter, and whenever he could eke out a shot, he turned it into a fast run of five or six. After he'd lost the first three games, he took off his little red cap in a moment of bravado for the crowd. They loved it. He won game four by making a ball on the break and running seven more balls in about a minute.

In the next game, Lassiter again controlled. He tied Allen up, never let him get warm, made his speed [ability level] inconsequential and his knowledge of the table impotent. All through the final game (it took half an hour), a drunk in a tweed jacket and horn-rimmed glasses who had timidly placed \$25 on Lassiter with Allen's men kept shrieking every time Lassiter made a shot or a fine safety. "Atta boy, Wimpy, did you see that? He never misses that cut . . . Nice and easy, nice and easy, goddamn, look at that! He's still the greatest, Chuck. Shit, come on Wimpy." Lassiter never looked up at him (Allen did), nor did the still anxiousness of every move he made through all five games ever loosen. In fact, it got worse until he sank the last ball and the drunk had given his last whoop. Lassiter was shaking badly and breathing very heavily. The crowd stood, applauding, and he walked from the table to the stool where Allen sat smiling. Wimpy shook hands with his left, cue dragging on the floor from his right. He was smiling the smile he seems always to want to repress.

The next night, before a full house, Lassiter beat Joe Russo in Straight Pool, Nine-ball and One-pocket for the overall championship. Russo gave him little trouble. As their last game of One-pocket ended and the announcement of Lassiter's championship was made, and the table lights were turned off, and as Lassiter tried to pack his cue between handshakes, Ronnie Allen stepped into the darkened pit and got \$5,000 in \$20 bills on table number one. He said nothing. Lassiter moved past him and through the crowd and then made his way into the restaurant that Jansco runs in the same building. None of the crowd left their seats and Allen stood talking with some of them -- his money still on the table -- as his friends were dispatched to find Lassiter . . . and work out the terms.

Al Miller and Lassiter were sitting together eating grilled cheese sandwiches when the first offer was made. Lassiter told Allen's moneymen to go away. He didn't want to play; but then he said he'd think about it.

"Give him a chance to unwind, for Christ sakes. He just finished playing," said Miller.

They left and another man arrived. He had a Latin complexion, a dark blue suit and sunglasses. Lassiter and Miller knew him and he sat down.

"I'm tired," Lassiter told him. "I'm just tired and nervous."

"Why don't you take something?"

"I do, it helps a little."

"What do you take?"

"Compoz."

"What?"

"Compoz. C-O-M-P-O-Z. It's supposed to calm you down."

"Yeah, all right. Listen, they want to spot you two balls, for three hundred a game. Nobody in there has left their seats, Wimpy."

"They all want to see me get beat. They love that."

"Come on, Wimpy. They're waiting."

The man in the sunglasses was standing now. Miller finished his sandwich and said, "Tomorrow we'll take off and play some golf. You can relax then. It's all right."

"Yeah, but I'm nervous. *Nervous*. I'm afraid I'm going to get beat." He was wiping cheese off his mouth with a paper napkin and shaking his head.

"Come on. You been beat before, haven't you?" said the man in the sunglasses.

Lassiter said yes, shook his head, picked up his cue case and the three of them went back to the pit room.

Allen was waiting, along with the crowd. At this point, the reporter's eyes and ears became no good to him. Because finally, it's no fun to resist the lies anymore, or to remain the only sober man in a room full of hustlers. They played seven games, or eight, or twelve; it depends on whom you ask. Lassiter won five and Allen won three, or they both won four. They played for \$300 a game; or they played for \$600. The backer in the dark glasses made a bundle, or he made a couple of bucks, or he lost heavily. Allen was drunk. Lassiter quit because his head was getting funny; he quit when Allen wanted to lower the spot. There was no referee and Lassiter played in his shirt sleeves instead of his coat. There was no scorekeeper, and the story of what happened got retold only by people who had a stake in how the story went: "I lost 'cause Lassiter chickened out. Allen couldn't take the heat. I won a bundle." "I came out about even. Lucky thing, 'cause Lassiter was starting to crack." "Allen hadn't slept for two days and he was so goddamn drunk."

"Hey, Danny, you going to be at the Stardust in March?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe we can play some Nine-ball."

"Yeah, if my neck's better by then."