

COCHRAN'S POOL AND BILLIARD HALL

I hung out with Devin mostly in that in-between time, right after Mary had gone back to Scotland and before I met and moved in with Maggie. I even crashed at 86 Golden Gate for a while, starting the night of Mary's going-away party when everything got all fucked up between my roommates Severus and Pantha and me. We spent Mary's last couple of weeks in San Francisco in Devin and Adrian's space at 86 and I just stayed on, like a zombie, for a few months after she'd gone. I was still in the Air Force then and technically living up on the base in Fairfield for most of the week. So, when things finally got a little strained in that tiny cluttered room with the shaky lofts, I moved my stuff into my old room at my mom's apartment in the projects in Chinatown and stayed there on the weekends until I got out of the service and Maggie and I found a place together Downtown.

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I guess Devin had already started tweaking out by then. I mean, the guy goes overboard with everything. He binges on speed—he'd started shooting it again, so it's no wonder he freaks out. But, what the hell, am I his father? I don't know how to help the guy. I'd like to, but people almost always do what they want to do, or what they think they need to do. It's pretty much impossible to affect someone—and if you do it's usually by accident. Hey, everybody makes their own life, you know, we all make our own decisions and we have to look out for ourselves. That's my philosophy anyway.

It didn't seem like there was anything especially wrong with Devin that night, like he was on the edge of freaking out or anything, but the more I think about it now, the more signs I can see in the way he was acting that he was gearing up for something.

He had found a way to get into the old pool hall all on his own. It's right across the street from 86, in that wedge of buildings where Market Street meets Golden Gate at that weird angle. There's a parking lot closing up the triangle on the Jones Street side, and we were walking through it on our way back to 86 after dinner at Tu-Lan's. I was feeling totally bloated and relaxed from eating a big meal of their great Vietnamese food—you know, like when you wanna stretch out and go to sleep it feels so good. We'd been ravenous and had eaten too much too fast and were talking about trying to walk it off by going to a bar somewhere when

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Devin looks up at the billboard above the parking lot. It's all lit up, a stupid lighthouse by the sea advertising a fucking bank or something, looming there above the dark and quiet parking lot, and he says, "Hey, Johnny, you wanna shoot a few games of pool?" Which sounds good 'cause I'm expecting the thick Vietnamese coffee that we've just had to kick in any minute and make us all energetic and shit, and I think he's talkin' about heading over to the Savoy Tivoli in North Beach, or maybe walking over to that place on Polk, the gay bar with the two cheap pool tables in the back. Instead, he points at the billboard and the building behind it and says, "I finally found a way to get in."

'Cause we used to sit around at 86 all the time, when Adrian was still living there, getting drunk and hanging out and we'd look out the window and see the old dark neon sign on top of the building across the street advertising "COCHRAN'S POOL AND BILLIARD HALL." That sign hadn't been lit-up in God knows how long, and the door to the place was chained up and had become a urinal of sorts, for those too lazy to get to the parking lot and piss more privately behind the cars. And we always threatened to go over there and try to find a way to get in, to see if there was anything left of it. The subject usually came up around the time we were getting bored lying around drinking, but always after we were too drunk or worn out from playing music to actually do anything about it.

"You did?" I said, following Devin's pointing finger to the lighthouse

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shining its amber searchlight across the stormy sea of mutual funds up above our heads. Man, that thing was huge and put out a lot of light—I don't know how anybody had the nerve to go into the porn theater across the street.

"Yeah, I found a way into that pool hall up on the second floor," Devin tells me, "and it's perfect. They never moved the tables or cues or any of that stuff out. It's totally cool. We can play all night if we want to."

"How do you do it—is it hard?"

Devin led me over to one of the girders holding the billboard up against the back wall of the triangular building. "I made a sort of ladder by sawing a saw-tooth pattern into this long flat board I found. You lean it here into the corner of the I-beam and walk up it like stairs, using your hands on the beam for balance, like this, to pull yourself up until you're high enough to grab the ladder." I could see the ladder hanging out from under the billboard's catwalk about twenty-five or thirty feet up, like a fire escape ladder. "Then you just climb up to the catwalk and walk across it, around the billboard, and jump over onto the roof. Easy as that."

"How do you get in from the roof?"

"Come on." He started pulling me on towards 86 again and explaining, more excitedly now. "There's a, I guess, fire escape kind of thing in the bathroom—it's got like a hatch. You open it and slide down the pipes against the wall like going down a rope. Here," he handed me two bills, "you go get us some beer and

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I'll go up to my place and get the board."

He ran across the street then and went into the elaborate 86 door-unlocking procedure—and since there's no buzzer or anything like that, I yelled over to him to leave it open. He nodded before charging on into the purple doorway and up that long single flight of stairs where I'd followed him like a million times. I could see that endless narrow passage of green shag carpeting that had such a long way to go to clear the height of the movie theater at ground level. I had heard that the big open space, where all of the lofts are now, used to be a gym. Well, half the workout woulda been trippin' up those stairs just to get to it.

I went around the corner to one of the liquor stores on Turk and got a forty of the Green Death and a sixer of Elephant, and then went back out into the night. It was all flashing lights there on Turk Street, and idiots standing around getting drunk, coming up to ya, gotta talk to ya, trying to get something offa ya, cars rushing by, ogling the ladies. Somebody somewhere had a radio blasting mostly static. I felt pretty good, pretty adventurous and ready to climb. What the hell, if Devin had gotten into and out of this place before and it'd been okay, well, then, it was probably all right. And what's trespassing? The worst it could be was a night in jail and it probably wouldn't even be that. So what the hell, I'm thinking, let's do it. I guess the beers I'd had with dinner and that Vietnamese coffee were swirling around together inside me by now 'cause I felt like a rush and kinda fucked up at

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the same time. I lit a cigarette to keep the buzz on and walked back around the corner to 86.

By the time I got there the door was locked. I was about to go across the street to the payphone in the parking lot to call Devin and make him come down and let me in—which I hate to do, you know, cause it's so disgusting in that parking lot and I think guys piss on the phone for fun—when I remember that I still have my old keys from when I was living there.

The next thing I know I'm climbing up those old familiar stairs for the first time in months and the smell of it is coming back to me, right up from the rotting carpet left over from the fucking '70s. It doesn't smell like any other place I've ever been in; it's not like bars or clubs, you know, beer and leather and dampness and all of 'em the same. 86 is a sort of unique collection of odors: the dusty old shag carpet like somebody's parents' house in the suburbs, plus a little of that beer and leather and all the paint and turpentine from the artists' apartments, and the sheet rock and stolen lumber that everything in there is built out of, surrounded on its edges by the lingering smell of the sweaty gym that the space used to be.

There was a lot of junk stacked on the landing (as usual), building supplies and furniture that people were throwing out. As I went by the doors down the crooked makeshift hallway I remembered what the inside of each space was like and the people who'd lived in them when I'd been staying there. Down at the end

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of the hallway was Devin's room, the cheapest and smallest in the place; I could hear him moving stuff around behind the thin sheet rock walls. The place was kinda like a tree fort that a bunch of kids had built in a grammar school gymnasium and Devin and Adrian's room had always been the worst of the lot, the messiest, the one with the shabbiest lofts and the most dangerous wiring. Still, I'd never seen it like this. "Jesus," I said laughing, "what happened here?"

"What?" Devin looked up, almost like he didn't quite understand what I was talking about. "Oh, this? Yeah, well, I had it completely clean, and then there were a couple of great dumpsters in the neighborhood, you know."

"What the hell are you going to do with all this shit?"

"A lot of it, like the concrete and wood, is construction and art material. I want to get rid of these stupid loft beds we built in such a hurry and make a really good loft. And this window is so big I want to put a balcony outside of it."

"That sounds cool. Do you know how to build it so it won't fall down?"

"Sure. What kind of beer did you get?"

"The beer of your homeland" (Devin had grown up in Seattle) "and a six pack of Elephant."

"Rainier? Jesus, we could do better than that!"

"Mostly it was for old times' sake. You got an opener?"

"Somewhere."

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Devin had already found his saw-toothed board, which, because it was pretty big and the room so small, hadn't taken much of an effort. But the can opener took forever to find, and then we decided we needed a backpack to carry the beer in, and we had to have some music. So we opened two of the beers and started searching through the wreckage that covered the floor for a backpack, a tape deck, and some tapes to play.

"I like your, eh, friend here." He had a female-shaped mannequin lying on its back on some cinder blocks in the center of the room.

"Yeah, thanks. Right now she's Sally the fallen angel prostitute. She was Sally the angel—I had her strung up to the ceiling, but she fell down and her wings got crushed and they were too fucked-up to fix."

"Here's the backpack—hand me the beers," I said, trying to get all of our shit together. Devin threw his saw-toothed board over his shoulder and we went down, out, across the street and back through the parking lot to the base of the billboard. Amazingly, Devin's plan worked perfectly. We leaned the board in the inside corner of the I-beam holding up the billboard, its saw-tooth pattern giving us footholds, and grabbed onto the backside of the beam with our hands to pull ourselves up. Devin ran right up the edge of the board like it was a stairway, hardly using his hands at all. He was going too fast and had to jump up to the hanging ladder above in one quick lunge as the board kicked out from under him.

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Still, his hands caught the bottom rung; he did this amazingly athletic chin-up, curled his leg around the rung, and made it onto the ladder like some sort of enormous noisy insect going up a wall.

“Hey, slow down, dude” –I was trying to get the board back into place. “Here, take the backpack so I can get up.” I tossed it up to him and he went off again, straight up the ladder like a shot.

I climbed the I-beam on the stair-step board too and when I got up to the ladder I yelled, “Hey, Devin, do I leave the board down there?”

“Yeah,” he hollered back, never turning around, “just leave it.”

It was a long way up that rickety ladder and it didn't feel very secure with Devin bouncing along like a maniac above me – then someone yelled at us from the parking lot. You know, “Get down from up there!” or some parental crap like that. I shrugged up at Devin when he looked back. “It's only one of those chicken-shit valet parking dudes; he's only kidding.” I wasn't so sure, but we kept on climbing just the same.

When we got up to the scaffolding at the foot of the billboard it was okay to look down 'cause there was at least a little something under our feet now, and a railing. We hopped over to the flat, tar-paper roof of the building and walked around the edges for a while, checking out the view of Market Street, which we only ever saw from the sidewalk.

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"This reminds me of when I was in high school," I told him. "We used to sit around on the roof of that old grammar school over at Hyde and Sutter and drink tequila."

"Come on, the hatch's over here somewhere." Devin takes me over to this wooden box-thing that we lift up together, like a hatbox lid, and you could see about a foot-and-a-half space between the roof and the drop ceiling and then a black nothingness below that. We got some newspapers from somewhere, lit them on fire with my lighter, and dropped 'em into the hole so that we could see how far down the floor was, and Devin went right in. I dropped the lighter down to him quickly, before the newspaper had time to burn out, and he used that to get over to the circuit board and he lit the whole place up. The blank space below turned into a bathroom, as Devin had promised, and I slid down a pole to the top of a urinal and hopped onto the floor.

Cochran's Pool Hall was huge inside: all the tables, cues, the scoring pegs, stools, nearly everything, intact. Even the Coke and pinball machines and a snack bar with a fryer for French fries and an old '50s milkshake blender were sitting on the counter untouched. They looked like they were still waiting for the short-order cook to come in and fire 'em up. I couldn't believe that the place had never been cleaned out or ransacked. It was right outta *The Hustler* or something. And, oh, the funniest thing was that the little book the place had used to write out their payroll

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checks was sitting open by the cash register; it was as if the last thing they had done before closing up forever was to pay everybody off. The checks were personalized "COCHRAN'S POOL AND BILLIARD HALL," with their motto underneath, "Home of the Hustlers."

Before anything else, Devin took out the tape recorder—he knew right where to plug it in—put on the first Killing Joke album, and I opened up two beers for us. The only thing missing were balls. For some reason there weren't that many of them, and the few that were left were in two different sizes. I guess balls are the easiest pool hall items to take away with you—and there was some garbage lying around like someone had been in there before us, even a spot where it looked like somebody had tried to build a fire to keep warm maybe. I didn't ask Devin if it'd been him.

He got real pissed about the balls being two different sizes and threw one across the room. It was funny; the walls were so heavily wallpapered, or so cheap, that the ball made this thick thud into it, went about a half an inch into the plaster, sat there for a second, and then dropped gently onto the floor. Pretty anticlimactic.

"Mellow out, Devin. So we'll have two sizes of balls, no big deal."

There was still a rack in every table, as far as I could see, and everything in its place. Some of the panels of the drop ceiling had fallen in here and there so we had to hunt around for the cleanest-looking table. "Man, these Olympic-size tables

are too fucking big," I told Devin.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" I said. "You been practicing or what? You don't sink anything by accident on these bastards, and you can hardly see from one end to the other for the cigarette smoke."

"All right, how 'bout this one?"

"Yeah, looks okay." I ran my hand across the felt and it seemed pretty smooth, but even the smaller tables looked extra big, I guess because I'm so used to playing in bars, and this whole place was so enormous – with the high ceiling and all – and because there was only me and Devin and twenty or so empty tables in it.

Usually, when I'm not up on the base, I play at the Savoy Tivoli, where they have two tiny tables and it's always crowded – unless you go in the early afternoon. Or that place we found on Polk Street, the old Western-style gay bar called the Roundup, which has a pool table in the back that's been totally forgotten by the older regulars who hang out up at the bar. It still only costs a quarter there and they make these incredibly cheap Long Island Ice Teas in canning jars. One's enough for a whole evening of fun.

I brushed the table clean while Devin hunted around for some chalk and picked out a couple of not-too-warped cues.

It was quiet for a couple of minutes and I was thinking about one afternoon

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when I went to the Savoy with Kate and showed her the basics of how to shoot pool. She picked it up pretty quickly and the more we drank the better we got. We were both bummed that afternoon, she about breaking up with Stan and me all fucked-up over Mary having to go back to Scotland, and Annette was doing too much speed and driving me crazy with all of her invented problems, and it felt good just to hang out with someone, shoot some pool, drink, and talk.

It had been such a beautiful afternoon too, as I remembered it. There's this perfect half an hour or so at the Savoy, right after they open up, when the sun comes down under the awning of the patio but hasn't quite gone below the roofs of the flats across the street, when the place lights up with long shadows and that great feeling of the end of the day. It makes you want to stretch out and let go and wait 'til the night comes in and you can start all over again.

"You break 'em up, dude," I said while Devin was racking up the balls. He did, but he took the shot in a rush and hit it too hard and caught the rack too far to one side, only one or two balls splitting out at the corners. That pissed him off and he broke his cue over the edge of the table next to ours.

"Hey, Devin, calm down—you're scaring me."

"Don't worry about it, we've got plenty of cues." He spread his arms out and behind him there was a long rack, like a whole wall of cues, a couple of hundred of them hung up in a row like a picket fence.

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"All right, but just don't break 'em all, okay?"

How could I get mad at the guy? He was only playing around, and he had that cute little boy grin and everything. So I took my shot and said, "OK, I'm solids."

"I guess that means I'm stripes," he said, circling the table, looking for a shot.

I shot twice more and said, "Yours. I blew it."

"Cool."

We shot for a while, back and forth, until Devin asked, "How do you use these things?" He was playing with the score pegs, which were strung out on wires crisscrossing the whole place, up above the tables, like a grid hovering over the whole room.

"Use 'em in billiards, I think."

"Oh," he whacked the wire above our table with his cue and it snapped, throwing the little round pegs all over us like confetti at a party.

"Devin!"

"Sorry," – he was grinning calmly, chuckling – "I didn't mean to break it." I had to laugh too, and we started picking the pegs up off of our table and tossing them at different targets around the room.

"Well, anyway, no police." I was pleased, loosened up, having fun now.

"What? You mean from that goon yelling at us?" Devin was indignant.

"Yeah, I thought they'd be here by now and cartin' us away."

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“Ah, I think it was only one of those dickhead parking attendants from the Golden Gate Theater. They think they’re God on this block, or vigilantes or something. They’re all assholes down there. Probably no one gives a shit about what happens to this place anymore – not enough to call the cops on us anyway.”

We shot three or four more games before Devin got disgusted with losing. “Hey,” I told him, “if you’d only pay attention and calm down a little bit you’d do a lot better. I’m only winning ‘cause I play all week long up at the base – you know, there’s nothing else to do in Fairfield.” He nodded but gave me that look he always used to give me when he felt deserted somehow, like when I’d leave the bar or club we were in with a woman or something. And I’ve told him lots of times how stupid it is to romanticize that. It’s no big thing to get a woman to go home with you, you only have to go out and do it to see there isn’t any huge mystery to it. Obviously, Devin had ego problems. He was always rushing around, or drinking, or doing something crazy, always a little bit out in front of himself, trying to get someone to prove to him that they really cared about him by picking up the pieces after his more destructive experiments. But, you know, if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that you just can’t depend on other people all the time – all they do is let you down.