

## THE MEDITATOR

It had become a habit for Jack, ending his morning of work with a walk over to the Casino for a cup of coffee. Days he didn't work he still went down, there was something he liked about the mid-day crowd in the lounge: there were some real characters in there. First there was Audie, who had been named after the 1950's Cowboy Movie star. Everyone knew he was a little crazy but all the time he would surprise people by knowing something no one else did. Like the fact that for a long time people thought he couldn't read and then he would spout out a quote from the Bible that someone had on the tip of their tongue. He was about 60 years old and had a fair sized pot belly, probably due to the fact that no one in the 10 years he had been coming to that lounge had ever seen him consume anything but beer.

Then there was Rob. In his day, Jack had known a few people named Rob and by some quirk of fate it seemed that all of them were pathological liars. Some people might change a detail or two about a story or forget part of it and fill it in to the best of their knowledge, but Rob would completely fabricate nearly everything that came out of his mouth. The funny thing was that no one cared. A good deal of the time they actually enjoyed listening to the guy because he could spin a good yarn. He was the kind of guy who would do anything for a laugh. One time Jack came in and sat next to Rob and they started talking and Rob said that Maria's boyfriend was all pissed off at him. When Jack asked why that was, though he had no particular interest in the answer that came out of him, Rob said that he had gotten a tattoo of Maria's name on his shoulder. Then he said to Jack that he had also put his name on his shoulder. Jack was intrigued, and looked forward to confronting Rob when he went to show these supposed tattoos and they weren't there. So Jack called 'bullshit' and Rob took off his coat, rolled up his sleeve and there was a fresh tattoo, which read "your name" in blue ink. Jack looked at him blank-faced. The stupidity of this man, he thought to himself, knows no bounds.

Jack was a fairly honest guy but he never really seemed to find many honest friends. He liked having people around to talk to, though, and he liked to feign interest and fake caring about other's lives when in reality it didn't add up to dried shit in his preferred version of reality. Paying the rent, having enough for food and video rentals was about it. He had quit smoking some years back, quit drinking some time after, and now had very few needs. Clothes maybe in the winter, nothing fancy because he worked unloading trucks. Just warm stuff and the odd set of

gloves or a new pair of boots every couple of years. He didn't want a car and didn't really need much. Life went on like this for most of his 30's.

Jack reached the age of 37 and after having some cake with his aunt and cousin, his only surviving relatives, he got to thinking about a lot of things. Though he didn't have the sex drive of a teenager, he wouldn't mind getting together with a nice looking girlfriend. He even thought that he wouldn't mind having a kid at some point, but he also thought that he was getting a little over the hill, thinking that when the kid was 11 and needed a father to teach him to shave, how to shine a pair of shoes, how to toss a football, he would be getting to be an old crone. Still, there was time, just not lots of it.

One of the things that made him think was that he spent most of his time in a bar. He went there just about every day, drank coffee and had lunch, made sure to tip well and all but he wouldn't want to raise a kid with any of the women he knew that hung out there. There were just a few types of women who came to that bar, there were the hookers looking to latch onto some of the big spenders or even better, the guys that won a big pot in the Casino part of the building and came to the lounge to celebrate. Then there were the gamblers, the women who would sit at the Video Poker terminals and stuff in \$20 bill after \$20 bill and feel somehow superior because they weren't wasting their time at the blackjack tables. There was the odd young woman just come for a drink, but that was what they were, young women. Nice to look at but not ready to settle down or willing to settle down with a 37 year-old laborer. Then there were the odd female alcoholics, who would be living with or at least sleeping with one of the regulars at some point. None of them would make a decent life partner, but this was all Jack knew. These were his friends. There had to be a better way, and it wasn't to be found in going after waitresses.

Jack put a lot of thought into it and he realized he would have to change his playground if he wanted to change his playmates, or find a playmate. One of the things he figured would be good would be to get to a gym, or a pool, some place where people go on a regular basis like the bar. He decided to go all in and forked out enough for a swim and gym pass through the city. This he figured was the best thing he could do, because he could work out and look better, feel better and maybe meet someone with the same desires.

Each day for a few weeks, Jack would take the bus to the pool. He started spending more and more time there, swimming laps and then sitting in the sauna

until sweat ran out of all of his pores, then jumping into the cool and refreshing water. He didn't know much about working out or swimming, but he knew it felt good. Then one day it happened: a small event that would turn the tide of his life.

Jack had swam more laps than normal, and felt a little dazed when he climbed up the underwater steps to the pool deck. He went to the shower outside of the sauna and set the water to cold and felt the icy blast run down his head and then all over him. He wanted to be icy cold and shivering when he went into the sauna, prolong the time he would be in there, until he felt completely cooked. It was a great feeling and it was also so he heard a great way to improve circulation. When he couldn't stand the cold anymore he shut off the shower and entered the comforting heat of the sauna. There was one person in there already: he looked to be Chinese. Jack had a funny feeling of familiarity when he saw him but he was fairly sure the man hadn't been at the pool while he had been coming.

"Afternoon!" Jack said in a friendly voice. The man nodded his head but said nothing.

Jack just assumed he didn't want to be bothered so he didn't say anymore to him. The man seemed to be concentrating, waiting for something. Sure enough, he took a long, deep breath, then folded his legs in a meditational type position and closed his eyes. Jack could see the perspiration forming on him knowing he had been in the sauna for some time and it seemed kind of fascinating. Jack sat down normally and closed his eyes, savoring the warmth, leaning his head back against the wood of the sauna walls. He got a little bored after a few minutes and looked down at his feet. He saw that one of his toenails was growing in kind of funny so he leaned over, and was able to bend it and tear it off because it had grown soft in the water and the heat. Not thinking, he flicked it and it landed on the rocks of the sauna and started to send up smoke that was absolutely acrid. Jack tried to pretend he didn't do it but the Chinese guy opened his eyes and the smell was horrible and he gave Jack a dirty look. Jack tried to smile but felt stupid so he left the sauna, dove into the water and swam to the other end of the pool and went to change and go home.

The next day Jack returned around the same time and he noticed the Meditator was there again. He was in the sauna but hadn't closed his eyes yet and wasn't cross-legged or anything, so Jack went in to talk to him.

“Sorry about the rocks yesterday.” Jack said in a humorous tone of voice. “I had a temporary brain fart.”

“What did you put on those rocks? That reeked!” The man said, seeming a bit put out. Jack was surprised that the man spoke perfect English and had no accent. He was expecting a Chinese voice. The man’s speech was disarming.

“Oh, just a small piece of toenail that was coming off. I flicked it and it kind of went wide and landed on the rocks.” Jack answered.

“Would you like to try meditating in here with me instead of driving me out of this relaxing room?” The Chinese man said.

“I’ll try it. I’ll try anything once. What all does it do?”

“Meditation lets us focus, lets the mind clear and as the toxins leave our body with the heat, the toxins leave our minds with the meditation.” Jack thought it was odd that he seemed so kind and peaceful when he had such a mean look yesterday.

“Sounds great. How does it work? Does it take long to learn?”

“It can take a lifetime or it can take a moment. It depends on the heart, not the calendar. First you cross your legs and balance yourself.” As he said this, he pulled in each of his legs under him. “Then you simply try to think of nothing. No clutter, no to-do list, just breathe. Count to ten, one number with each breath. If you think too much, go back to one. Then you keep going until you can get to ten.”

“Sounds pretty good. I’ll give it a try.” Jack said, pulling his legs under him. His thick and muscled legs didn’t get all the way under him, and his instructor laughed and said just to go as far as he could. He did so and then closed his eyes. It was kind of boring at first, but after a couple of breaths and starting over he realized it was going to be harder than he thought. After five minutes he opened his eyes and waited for his new friend to open his eyes. It took nearly 20 minutes and in that time Jack felt cooked.

“How long did you last?” The man queried.

“About five minutes.” Jack said with a chuckle.

“That’s good, very good for your first time. Try to practice every day, you will start to feel your mind get clearer.” Came the kind-sounding reply.

“What’s your name, friend?” Jack asked.

“My Chinese name is Chung, but my friends call me Charlie.”

“Nice to make the acquaintance.” Jack replied.

“Same time tomorrow?” Charlie asked.

“Same time. See you then.” Jack was absolutely deep fried as he said this and made a hasty exit, jumping into the cold pool as soon as he could and paddling himself completely under water until he felt half human again.

That day Jack started to think about having a coffee and decided to stop by the lounge at the Casino and say hello to his friends there. He took the bus, then went inside and none of them had gotten there yet. He had his coffee and then wanted to stretch his tired legs so he took a walk through the Casino floor. By some odd chance Charlie was there wearing a tuxedo. He was a pit boss apparently. That was where he had seen him before Jack realized. He had seen the guy kick a guy out for whatever reason and Charlie apparently had gone through some pretty rigorous martial arts training, he kicked the guy’s ass pretty good. He hadn’t done it in years, but Jack decided for some reason he was going to sit down and play a little roulette. He pulled out a couple of \$20 bills and put them down on the table and got some pink markers for them. He spread about \$5 worth of chips around and when the ball stopped rolling one of his chips hit, giving him around \$30 worth of chips. He

sat back, raked in his chips and then made small bets and watched the ball spin closely.

For some reason the ball seemed to be favoring the high numbers, the upper 12 as they are known in some circles. He put down some chips on the upper third betting space on the outside of the marked portion of the green table and the first third came up. He doubled his bet next time, on the upper third again and it came in. another \$40 in his coffers. His head started working faster, his eyes were darting around the board. He made a few more bets and some other players came and a small betting crowd seemed to gather. Things got too confusing so Jack stopped and cashed his chips in and went to the cashier. He ended up about \$100 better off than when he came in, not too bad considering he didn't make a lot more than that in a day's work. He knew he was lucky though and luck never lasted.

Over the next few weeks Jack went on going to the pool and learning from Charlie how to meditate and things seemed to be going really well. Still, he often missed his friends at the lounge and the atmosphere of music and clean surroundings, so he still stopped in for a coffee and a meal quite often. One day he came in and when he went to sit down at his favorite chair he noticed a full cup of coffee there. He asked Gavin the bartender if someone had taken his spot but he told Jack that the lady by the window had bought it for him. He looked over and there was a very attractive Asian lady sipping at a girlie drink. He tipped the coffee cup to her, and she waved him over. His heart nearly skipped a beat, and when he went to go to her table he nearly shook so much he spilled his coffee, but she smiled at him and he somehow was able to take it in stride.

"Hi there, I'm Jack. Pleased to meet you, thanks for the coffee. How did you know I was coming now?"

"I am friend of Cha-Lee. I see you play, you very lucky. I tell Cha-Lee you handsome, he tell me you be here." You remember me?

"Oh yes, you were the roulette spinner. I don't remember you being so pretty." The lady smiled and waved her hand at him.

“My clothes pretty, work clothes not pretty.” Jack smiled and looked in her eyes.

“So what did you wave me over here for?” Jack asked her.

The attractive female spinner slid a paper envelope over to him and said, “Look when I leave, then tear up. You come see me today.” Then she took a final sip of her drink and nervously got up and left by the patio exit.

When she was gone, Jack opened the envelope and it read:

Use the ATM card inside to take \$1,000.00

ATM code is 7777

Come to table #54 at 5:00pm

Get \$100 value markers

Play the outside, alternate bets

Keep an eye on Charlie

When he coughs, put maximum \$500 on #5

Take half, deposit rest in ATM

“Oh my God.” Jack whispered to himself. Charlie you beautiful bastard. \$500 on the inside is 36 to one, that’s \$18 grand, \$9 for me. He looked up at the clock, it read 11:13 am. Trip to the bank and back, nice meal. Hang out here then... easy street. What the hell am I going to do with nine thousand bucks? A car. No. No. A condo. A nice little townhouse, rent the basement, have something to sell for retirement. Yes. Perfect. The clock ticked away, second by slowing second.

Jack sat and finished his coffee, though later he wished he hadn’t. The caffeine had the effect of making his hands tremble and that made him think he was easy to spot as a con artist, which made him worry right down to the pit of his stomach. Then he started to feel guilty. But he turned off the moral side of himself

and turned on the logical side. Who really loses here? He asked himself. The Casino? Those places are so crooked they are lucky no one has burned them down out of spite. I've been going in there, buying coffee, buying meals. Not the greatest meals either, their only good item on the menu is hamburgers and I've eaten enough of those to reimburse the \$9k right there. No chance I'm passing this up.

Jack continued this self talk as he walked. For a few moments he felt a little paranoid, wondering if people were watching him, wondering who would see what in the Casino. Little did he know that almost nothing that happens in the Casino unless it's in the bathroom goes on without being seen. He got the cash, then went out for a steak and baked potato and a cold beer to calm his nerves. When he got back to the Casino, it was only 2:00pm and all the regulars were there. Happily, but without explanation he bought drinks for all his friends and had a few more himself. He really liked the feeling of a few drinks added to how much better he felt from working out. Time started to slip past, and he was a bit unsteady when time came to sit down at table #54. At first there wasn't room but he pushed his way through to the table and put down the \$800 he had left, only he asked for \$50 chips instead of \$100. He felt invincible and thought if he made a few bets he would be even more ahead when the #5 bet came in and then he could really party.

It was just ten minutes to five and Jack decided to try his old trick that had never failed him before. He watched and waited, trying to figure out a pattern and he noticed the low 12 was coming up a lot. He put down two \$50 chips on the low 12 and watched the metal ball roll across the 36 numbers and two zeros and land on 32.. high twelve. He watched and waited again as the second twelve then the third twelve then the second twelve came up. Then he put \$200 on the first 12, thinking it was due to pay. He watched the spinner wave her hand and declare, "no more bets" and the ball seemed to roll for eons as he waited for it to stop. Second 12, number 17 came up.

"Damn!" Jack said, and the small part of him that was still sober knew bad things could happen if this got screwed up. He took his remaining \$500 and played the safest bet he could, black. Any number, 18 of the thirty-six could come up and if it were black he would be fine. He started to feel a little dizzy but this seemed like the right thing to do. The ball rolled, the hand waved, the lady spoke. The ball rolled. The ball rolled. Black, 25! The lady announced. For a minute he thought he had bet on the first 12 and didn't realize he just doubled back up to where he was. The chip counter pushed a stack of \$50 chips over to his stack of 10 of them. He looked over at Charlie, who was actually sweating and he was coughing so hard he



nearly doubled over. He looked at the roller, the Asian lady who had given him the envelope. She gave him a slight nod. Now he was sober. Dead sober. He had a little idea, a very little idea but it wasn't all bad.

"Pit boss!" He yelled. Charlie came over.

"Yes Sir?" Charlie replied.

"What's the maximum bet on the inside 36 numbers?" Charlie's eyes seemed to bulge. For some reason it looked as though he was actually angry for some reason.

"\$500 at this table, Sir" Charlie said, gritting his teeth.

"I want to bet a thousand. Can I get approval?"

"Let me ask my boss, just one second." Charlie got on his radio and spoke a few words in Chinese and a few words came back. "Yes, Sir! You can bet a thousand."

"Okay, a thousand on #5." The spinner shot a quick glance at Charlie but he was too busy biting his tongue to see it. Jack slid the 20 \$50 chips over and a couple of people put a lucky chip marker on top of it. The wheel spun and rolled and bobbed, and jumped around and finally came to rest on #5. The crowd that had been watching cheered, and a massive adrenaline rush went through Jack's whole body. The table didn't even have enough chips in his color to pay the bet, but Jack told them to cash him out and they gave him 72 \$500 chips in payment. Then he went to the cashier and asked for two checks to be written which he filled in all but the name on both. Anyone watching might rob him but not knowing he didn't have the names wasn't apparent to anyone so he was reasonably safe. He put them both in envelopes, sealed them up and wrote "Pit Boss" on one and "Kathy" on the other, then he went out, deposited the "Pit Boss" envelope in the ATM then went for a long walk.

Jack walked for hours, for so long that the sun ended up coming up. He had felt good, and he had been a little drunk, which he hadn't been in a very long time but something weighed heavily on his heart. He walked and walked and then came to a little house with a beat-up old Chevrolet station wagon parked in the driveway and no lights on. He waited until the occupants woke up and after a while a young woman and a ten year-old girl came out. He was standing at the end of her sidewalk.

"Jack," the woman said. "I thought you were going to stay away from us. I thought we went over this."

"Jenny, I just wanted to give a little gift to my daughter."

"Mommy, who is this guy?" the little girl asked, confused.

"He's someone Mommy knew before you were born."

"Is he my Daddy?" she asked.

"No honey. To be a Daddy you have to work hard and provide and love and care for. This man never loved anything or gave anything or did anything."

"I don't understand Mommy." The little girl said, feeling afraid.

"I don't understand either. I don't understand why he is HERE!" The woman said, getting angry.

"Just take this. Take this envelope and I'll stay away forever."

"Put it in the mailbox. I have to take Kathy to school."

Jack felt a thousand pent-up emotions try to burst open his chest. His eyes began to tear up, but he solemnly walked to the mailbox and put the letter in it. Kathy and her Mother left and he stood there for a while, wondering what to do next, wondering if he should find a high bridge or a piece of rope or a fast moving bus to step in front of. Instead, he walked five miles to get back downtown and got on a bus headed East and he didn't get off it until it was near the Ocean where he got a job and a pair of boots and forgot about all that he left behind. He even found another bar but gave up swimming, except in the Ocean.

THE END