

Playing the Odds

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In his 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe laid out a hefty challenge for short story writers—a pronouncement that likely still threatens to humble many of us today: Speaking of how a “skillful literary artist” should approach craft, Poe wrote that “having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. *If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step.*”

Those italics are mine, of course. That's the part that keeps me wondering whether I'm doing anything right.

Just for example, here's the initial sentence of my story [“The Odds Are Against Us,”](#) originally published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in November 2014 and currently a finalist for [this year's Agatha Awards](#), to be presented at Malice Domestic later this week.

“How about a gimlet?” I asked.

What is the unique single effect I'm after with the story? And how does this sentence tend toward the “outbringing” of the effect? Sitting down to write this essay, even I struggled with those questions. On the surface, it seems such a flimsy little throwaway of a line.

And yet....

Thinking about it (maybe thinking harder than I should), I *could* argue that the line sets up a tension between seeming spontaneity and actual calculation—between facades generally and the dark truths behind them. After all, the question isn't ultimately as off the cuff as it seems, and a lot hinges on the response, life or death stakes.

I could talk about all that's suggested by sharing drinks in general—in this case drinks with the narrator's old friend Terry, who's also the bartender: not just friendliness but intimacy even; an occasion for easy conversations, for relaxing and letting down your guard; a small bit of winding-down, end-of-the-day pleasure, a getaway from the pressures of the real world. Maybe all that's folded in there too, with some ironic twists. The story is—at its heart—about friendship and about remembering old times, even as it's a story about the betrayal of that friendship, about being unable to get away from the real world, about how maybe you should never let down your guard.

I wish I could say I'd intentionally packed any of those ideas in there, but really, all that might be layering on meaning in retrospect. The simple fact is this: During the time I first conceived of the story, I had been enjoying a gimlet or two myself of an evening, and as I mixed one and then sipped it on the porch, my mind wandered. The opening line, in that context, is simply a toast to inspiration.

And yet (again)...that word *inspiration* sends me in the other direction. I can't drink gimlets without thinking Chandler, without thinking of *The Long Goodbye* and of how the gimlet serves as a pivotal motif throughout the book: the way Marlowe and Terry Lennox first bond over them; the way the drink comes back as a tribute to that friendship, fond memories, better times; and the way it eventually takes on a different meaning as friendship turns to deception and betrayal and all kinds of sourness.

The kinds of concerns at the core of my own story.

I can't say I intended with any "deliberate care" for that gimlet to allude to the themes or motifs of what might be the finest detective novel of all time. I didn't. In fact, if I had any author deliberately in mind as an inspiration for the story, it was David Goodis. But maybe creativity works in ways that we don't realize in the moment, right?

Until writing this essay, I didn't actually recognize the resonance between the two stories, the weight of having named one of my own characters Terry. It honestly never crossed my conscious mind.

Here are the first two pages, in full, of "The Odds Are Against Us":

"How about a gimlet?" I asked.

"Special occasion?" Terry said, skeptical more than suspicious. "Or just a change of pace?"

"Change of pace," I said, waving it off, and Terry didn't blink an eye, just reached for a martini glass and tossed some ice in it, then turned toward the shelves of liquor behind him. There was a mirror back there, and I watched him close.

Here was the game I was playing. If he made it with gin, that meant yes, and if he made it with vodka, that meant no.

My heart sank a little when he reached for the Gordon's, and I told myself that I should've bet on the kind of gin instead: Tanqueray yes, Gordon's no, or something like that.

Terry was quick to make the drink because business was slow that night. Tuesdays always were. Just me on my side of the bar and him on his, and then some empty tables behind me and three guys playing cutthroat at the pool table near the back. I had something going there too: if one of them left before the others, that was a no, but if they left as a group, that was a yes. I'd made that bet when I caught sight of one of them reaching for his jacket. Then he'd just picked up his cue again and settled back into the game.

Terry stirred the drink, strained it into a glass he'd chilled. Age spots beginning to crop up on the back of his hands. Here I was, saw him a couple of times a week, but I'd never noticed it until tonight.

"Gimlet." He smiled broadly as he set it down in front of me, ice crystals skimming the surface. "Mixed perfect, you see if it's not."

My turn to nod. Perfect sure, but it was still gonna taste tough going down.

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Outside, it was threatening rain. A cold rain coming, it had felt like, hints of a hard winter further on down the line. A Phillies game was on the TV above the bar, and it looked chilly there too, and the scroll along the bottom of the screen listed thunderstorm warnings, the wheres and the whens. A series of windows lined the top of the wall behind

me, looking up at the street, and as the wind picked up, I could hear it whisper along the edges of the glass. Trouble ahead out there. But inside, the weather was always fine, which is why that pool player putting on his jacket, like it was cold in there--that didn't make sense to me.

The bar was old school—not the slick mahogany and fresh brass and fancy martinis of some of those steakhouses that were cropping up downtown, trying to look like somebody. No, this was the real deal. Black walnut bar top dinged and scratched over the years. Parts of it so sticky from spilt beer and liquor that they could hardly be cleaned, but the whole thing smelling of Murphy's oil—proof that Terry tried. Sometimes when the bar was slow, you could find him moving from one end to the other, limping a little from a bicycle accident back when we were teenagers, wiping everything clean, dusting and polishing the glasses, checking the fittings on the taps. Most of the business was pints, but Terry carried cheap spirits along the rail and high-dollar options on the higher shelves. Twelve stools along the bar, those empty tables behind me, hardwood flooring stretching the length of the room. Some of the boards were a little discolored where they'd been replaced, but not patchwork looking, no. The pool table was old but level, and fresh green felt on it, at least a year or so before. A coal-burning stove sat over to one side, the kind of thing that might just be decoration in another place, but Terry would sometimes stoop down to throw some coal in it on a winter's night, and those nights it helped give the whole place a glow.

Terry didn't own the bar, but he took pride in it, and it seemed like his.

Sometimes we liked to feel we were our own men.

I won't go into as much detail about these pages as I did about the first line, but I do want to mention a couple of craft decisions I deliberately made here.

The opening scene was entirely about revealing the fact that the narrator's question isn't an innocent one—that it's part of an elaborate game that he's playing in his head, one in which he's personally invested. More importantly, it's a game that he's losing: “My heart sank a little...” and the fact that the drink “was still gonna taste tough

going down.” I wanted to provide the sense that he’s not just playing the odds but that he wishes he could stack them in his favor: “I should've bet on the kind of gin instead” and then the bet the narrator makes about the pool player reaching for his jacket, thinking (mistakenly) that it was a sure thing. I wanted the reader to wonder what it all meant, to be drawn forward by that curiosity.

At the same time, what was important to me wasn’t just engineering the plot (what happens next) but also painting a significant portrait of these two friends. I wanted to give the sense of history between them and the suggestion of a change brewing: long routine on the one hand—“business was slow that night. Tuesdays always were”—but on the other a hint of new perspectives, melancholy ones: “Age spots beginning to crop up on the back of his hands.... I'd never noticed it until tonight.”

Throughout, I wanted Terry to seem not just earnest but genuine in his friendship—guileless, generous, handing across that perfectly mixed gimlet with pride. I recognize (oh, how I do) that the long description of the bar is likely too much for a short story. Why not just sketch out the scene quickly? Why all that description? Isn’t this the very thing that [Elmore Leonard’s Rule #9](#) warned all of us *not* to do? But I wasn’t intending to so much sketch out the place as to explain something fuller about Terry himself: more about that pride (“Murphy’s oil”), that attention to detail of his (“wiping everything clean, dusting and polishing the glasses, checking the fittings on the taps”), the desire to create a sense of hominess (“some coal... on a winter's night”). I also intended the description to echo in a different way the whole idea of what’s real and what’s not (and maybe what’s lasting and what’s momentary): “The bar was old school—not the slick mahogany and fresh brass and fancy martinis of some of those steakhouses that were cropping up downtown, trying to look like somebody. No, this was the real deal.” I hope there’s also a hint that experience has left scars, and that those experiences and those scars have a realness and a weight and a persistence too: “Black walnut bar top dinged and scratched over the years. Parts of it so sticky from spilt beer and liquor that they could hardly be cleaned....”

The most important line for me was the kicker at the end of that second section: “Sometimes we liked to feel we were our own men”—echoing off of that line about the new bars “trying to look like somebody.” Everything for the narrator, maybe for Terry, certainly for me, hinged on the desire in that single sentiment.

How does being “our own men” (or being a man in general (or maybe failing to be one)) serve as the pivot around which the story turns? I hope that folks will read [the full story here](#) to see for themselves, and while I may not yet be living up to the challenge of Mr. Poe’s dictum from a century and a half ago, I do hope that some of my reflections here have served as an interesting annotation to both the story itself and to some larger sense of craft.

Art Taylor has won an Agatha, a Macavity, and three consecutive Derringer Awards for his short fiction in addition to being a finalist for the Anthony Award. Stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, in the Chesapeake Crime anthologies *This Job Is Murder* and *Homicidal Holidays*, and in other journals and anthologies. His novel in stories *On the Road With Del and Louise* will be published in September by Henry Press. He teaches at George Mason University and contributes frequently to the *Washington Post* and *Mystery Scene*. Check out his website at <http://www.arttaylorwriter.com>.

