

Mother and Father · *Jonathan Baumbach*

THE GAME IS POOL, sometimes called eight ball. My father and mother play the game each night before going to bed. I am there as observer, too young to account my age. My father likes to break and my mother, who is new to pool, tends to give the old man his head. It is her habit to admire his every gesture, his hesitations, false starts, benign mischances. Sometimes when he chalks his cue in his unassuming way, she can't help but emit a crow of pleasure at the secret grace of the gesture. Her praise makes him irritable, tends to throw him off his game. "I don't know what's wrong with me," he says when he scratches on the break. "What a stupid thing to do."

My mother allows that there must have been a distracting noise from outside and offers him the occasion to replay the opening hit.

"You usually break so beautifully," she adds. "I can spend whole days just watching you make the break."

"Well, you won't have another chance of watching it today," my father says. "I take full responsibility for my misplays. My failure is already part of the recorded past."

"I don't blame you for saying that," my mother says. "By the way, have you seen my stick? I like, as you know, the little one."

My father hands her his cue, which she accepts for an unhappy moment, then returns. "This is nicer, but I really prefer the one I'm used to."

She goes to the back wall and checks out the four remaining cues, discarding each in turn. "One of them must be yours," my father says, chewing on his impatience. "That's all we have."

Unconvinced, my mother selects the second smallest of the four remaining ones, which is visibly warped and has a worn tip.

"That one's no good," my father says, trying to take it from her. Their struggle produces inertia.

"You never let me use the one I want," my mother says. My father reads the cracks in the ceiling as antidote to that remark.

It is my mother's practice to address the first ball she fixes on and then decide in the ensuing moment that it is not for her. At that point she will ask my father if there is a better shot available, something more in keeping with her limited skill.

Putting symbol ahead of fact, my father denies that there is a shot on the table easier than the one my mother has fixed on. That said, the issue cleared, he manages with undisguised irritation to find her something better.

"I don't know," my mother says, moving between her alternatives, squinting over each as if to estimate its degree of difficulty. "They both look equally hard."

“The one I chose is easier,” he insists.

“If you say so,” says his skeptical opponent, rushing her shot. She mishits the cue ball, sending it in an alternate direction, accidentally nipping the five ball into a side pocket. Elation comes and goes.

“Was that the ball you were shooting?” my father asks.

The question flusters her temporarily. “I don’t remember,” she says. “Was that the one you recommended?”

My father chalks his cue to occupy an angry heart. “You can have the ball,” he says. “All acts include their intentions.”

My mother does not want any favors, reclaims the five from the ball drop and with the best will in the world is unable to find a place on the table to give it rest.

“I want you to have it,” my father says.

“You’re too good to me,” my mother replies, stuffing the ball in her apron pocket. With a flourish of determination, she drops the two in a side pocket and leaves herself in the worst possible position for a following shot.

“What do I do now, Max?” she asks.

The question does not elicit an answer, perhaps does not expect one. My mother studies the table as if the geometric language of the balls were an indecipherable code. If she doesn’t take her shot in the next moment, my father will break down and tell her all.

My mother chooses the most impossible shot of several improbable alternatives, reordering the table, and leaving my father without a shot to call his own.

His chronic irritation rises to the occasion. After circling the table a few times, he narrowly misses a bank shot on the ten the laws of physics had denied him in advance.

My mother claps her hands politely, fingers to palm. “That was almost wonderful,” she says.

“It’s the story of my life,” says my father.

As the game goes on, attrition works its will. Father moves ahead three balls to two, his first advantage of the match. My mother rises to the occasion at her next turn when, her intent elsewhere, she drops two of the solid balls with a single shot.

“I told you I was better off shooting my way,” she says.

My mother’s way, let it be said, is notable for having the cue move tremulously from side to side as it approaches the cue ball, coming at it from all sides. My father has advised her to tighten the groove between her fingers, but my mother’s success, accidental or not, is dependent on her own method.

My mother mishits the one ball into a corner pocket and assumes a five to three advantage.

My father chalks his cue to excess while my mother calculates her next play. As the game progresses, her pace becomes correspondingly deliberate. My father, a man of no patience in the best of seasons, appears on the verge of urging her to get whatever it is over and done.

"I have such trouble choosing my shots," she says in anticipation of his complaint. "Won't you help me just a little bit, Max."

"You're killing me, Helen," he says. "Why should I be complicit in my own defeat." He informs her that the four ball might be gently kissed into a corner pocket.

"The four?" My mother charts the distance with a glance. The ball idles in the foyer of a corner pocket at the far end of the table. "Max, you could make that shot, but I couldn't. Is there anything closer?"

My father says nothing to this, apparently aware that her complaint is obligatory, and hums an idle tune to himself to pass the time.

Sighing at his generosity, she lines up the shot with her characteristic astigmatic perception. (The wobble of her stick, like the blowing of a wind, tends to compensate for the inaccuracy of her aim.)

The cue ball, at my mother's touch, skips across the green in the general direction of its intent, kissing the four ball in such a way as to deny it sanctuary, the white ball visiting the pocket in its place.

"That's what you call a scratch, isn't it?" she asks. My father makes an affirmative noise in his throat. "I knew all along the shot was too long for me."

"You were proven right," my father says.

My mother has difficulty deciding what ball of hers to return, her fondness for them equal and indiscriminate. "Is the one all right?" she asks, "or must it be the last one I made."

"Anyone," says the authority.

While my mother procrastinates, my father charts the sequence of his remaining three shots, chalking his cue idly.

My mother returns the five, offering an elaborate rationalization for a decision that might have gone several different ways.

Concentrating on getting suitable position for the second of his three shots, or perhaps deflected by the pressures of irritation, my father misses a routine play on the fourteen, which had been lolling just to the right of a side pocket.

My mother is outraged at fate on my father's behalf. "You deserved to make it," she says. "If there was any justice the ball would have fallen for you."

"Justice wasn't wanting," says her adversary. "Merely skill."

"Well, I thought it was a difficult shot," says my mother, "and that you did beautifully with it." That issue out of the way, she proceeds (who can

say how?) to run her next two balls and barely miss a third, leaving her with one solid (the resurrected five) and the eight ball to carry off victory.

Up until this point, my father has not taken her quite seriously as an adversary. It has begun to dawn on him that there is more art in mother's game than accident, or that she is a mistress of benign fortune. He adjusts himself in imperceptible ways to whatever knowledge he is willing to own. Losing is too important to him to accept without a struggle.

Father is responsible for the stripes, the balls from nine through fifteen, the higher denominations, while my mother's province is the solids (balls one through seven). The eight ball, which gives the contest its name, is the final reckoning.

My father has a reasonable shot at the nine ball which resides on the rail some six inches from a corner pocket. To make the shot he must hit ball and cushion simultaneously. Though margin for error is small, the shot is unambiguous. My mother leans over his shoulder as he calculates his play, a student of father's expertise.

"I can't shoot when you sit on my shoulder," he reminds her.

"Try," she says, teasing. "I bet you can do it if you try."

My father makes the shot without looking back, then makes another. Anger inspires him.

My mother oohs and ahhs, creating a din of admiration. "Some days you just don't seem to know how to miss," she says.

"It happens that you're winning this game," he says.

"That's because I don't play to win," says my mother. "Winning and losing are the same to me."

"That's a lot of shit if I may say so," says my father, rushing his shot, cue ball following the twelve into a corner pocket. He mutters a mild oath, waving an arm as if knocking flies away.

"You ought to be pleased that you made the ball in the first place, and not always focus on the bad side of things."

"I didn't put enough back spin on the cue ball," he says, returning the twelve to the designated spot. "It was a failure of concentration."

My mother misses her next four attempts at the five ball, misses them badly, insisting with each failure that she plays the game merely for the pleasure of it. My father, who plays without pleasure, manages to dispose of the two remaining stripes and has only the eight ball to put away to claim victory. The sudden collapse of my mother's small skill troubles him. He suspects her of intentionally letting him win and is disposed, before taking what could be his final shot, to inform her of his suspicion.

The charge doesn't surprise my mother and she denies it categorically without conviction.

My father misses a middling difficult bank shot on the eight.

My mother sinks her cue ball in the corner and is obliged to return another of her solids to the table.

“You didn’t need to do that,” my father says.

“I’m doing the best I can,” my mother protests. “I told you I don’t care about winning.”

The eight ball, my father’s final quarry, awaits him in front of the far right corner pocket. There is much green between cue ball and eight, but the shot is less troubling to him than what he takes to be his wife’s patronizing play. He hangs up his cue and sits down on a high stool, his arms folded in front of him.

“Aren’t you taking your turn?” my mother asks.

“I’m retiring from the fray,” says my father. “If I wanted to play solitaire, I wouldn’t have engaged an opponent.”

“Anyway, you’ve won the game,” she says, offering the hand of a graceful loser.

My father gets off his stool and retrieves his stick. “This is the last time I’m playing with you,” he says, “the absolutely last time.”

This news ruffles my mother’s feathers, though not so my father would notice. She says it’s all the same to her whether they play or not, the game childish in her view, puerile, callow, infantile, a primitive pastime.

My father scratches on the eight ball, losing the game.

My mother refuses to claim victory, insists that my father really won, offering him the temptation of a replay. He almost accedes to her offer, rejecting it with visible pain.

When my mother walks off with her unclaimed victory—“You lost, I didn’t win,” she insists—my father racks the balls for another round.

I watch him from a high stool in the back of the room, his only spectator.

He walks around the table once before chalking his cue, businesslike in his aspect, characteristically harried. Father always looks as if he’s trying to remember something he’s supposed to do and forgotten.

The white ball explodes off his cue, bears down on the triangulated pack with uncompromising violence, dispersing the balls every which way, banging them about from end to side, three perhaps four balls escaping the table into waiting pockets. In five succeeding turns, six more balls retire from the table, my father announcing their destination before each shot.

Finally, a ball refuses to do as it’s told, and my father, who has been moving about the table in a hurry, disappears into the bathroom for some private reckoning. I grow to doubt his return.

He misses twice again before he cleans the table, sinking his final ball by banging it into a corner pocket with self-conscious flourish.

He hangs up his cue, puts out the lamp over the arena, takes one last look

over his shoulder, and leaves, some misplaced notes from a song on his tongue.

I remain behind on the higher of the high stools, deserted and forgotten, too small to climb down without aid, a first and final witness.