

“Anonymous”

By Dave McClain

A gambling addict tries for one last score, but this time, there's more at stake than money.

“Hi. I’m Terrence,” started the man in the expensive clothes.

“Hi, Terrence,” responded most of the dozen people sitting in the circle of chairs.

Terrence continued with some hesitation, “And... I’m... I’m a compulsive gambler.”

The mostly middle-aged meeting attendees smiled broadly... including the younger man wearing the hooded sweatshirt, even though he just seemed to be going along with the crowd.

Bill, the man sitting to Terrence’s right, patted him on the back as Terrence resumed speaking.

“I’ve been coming here for months and that’s the first time I’ve been able to admit that. My life has indeed become unmanageable.”

The woman on Terrence’s left patted his hand, which was resting limply on his thigh.

“For years, I gambled just for fun... a poker game here, a sports bet there... I make good money, so I could afford it. And I was getting pretty good. Winning more than losing... most of the time anyway. Then my wife got sick. I started seeing gambling as a way to help pay her medical bills, which were getting... whew... pretty out of control. Then I had a losing streak. Last month, I started borrowing some money from my father. I won some bets, but then I didn’t pay him back... or even pay the doctors’ bills. I felt I needed just one big score, to pay our bills, to pay back my dad, but I just kept getting in deeper and deeper. Yesterday... yesterday I took some money from my dad. Didn’t ask. Just took it. And placed a big bet. The kind of bet that, if I won, it would solve all my problems, but then again if... if...”

Terrence looked down at the floor and he saw a tear drop fall onto his shoe.

“I’m just so embarrassed. I... Even as I’m sitting here talking... I’m thinking about gambling. I really almost didn’t come tonight, but I knew I had to. I just... I... That’s it. That’s all. I pass.”

Everyone in the room clapped. Bill put his arm around Terrence’s shoulders and started speaking as the applause died down, “I lost most of my inheritance from my parents before I admitted I needed help with my addiction. But you’re there, buddy! You did it! You’ve taken the first step to recovery! You know you need a sponsor now. Call me if you want. You have my number.”

“Thanks,” Terrence said, finally looking up at Bill. “I’ll call.”

“Make sure you do. Everybody deserves a second chance and you’re reaching out to grab yours.”

“I’ll call you. Tomorrow. I promise.”

As Terrence walked away from the church where his meeting had just ended, he checked his watch and started walking a little faster. He heard footsteps behind him pick up their pace too.

“Good evening, counselor,” someone called out.

Terrence stopped in his tracks and turned around. The young man in the hoodie walked up to him, having exchanged the docile look that he had in the Gamblers Anonymous meeting for a more menacing one.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” said the young man, his brown eyes staring intently.

“No,” Terrence answered crisply.

“I’ve seen you in court. A couple years ago. You defended my uncle against a murder charge. My uncle Pablo. Unfortunately, you lost the case, but, hey, it’s not your fault, right?”

“Pablo Cortina.”

“Yeah, that’s it, counselor. You got it.”

“What’s your name? What do you want?”

“You know, people say I’m a lot like my uncle. I guess you can call me... Junior.”

“Fine. Junior. Now, what do you want? Why are you even here?”

“Weren’t you listening in there? I’m a compulsive gambler! I need help!”

Terrence just stared at the young man until Junior spoke again.

“The thing about these groups is some of the people aren’t really ready to quit. I sometimes come to these things to meet fine upstanding people like yourself... and offer my services.”

“What services?”

“You need money, right? For your wife? Me and my associates would be more than happy to...”

“Not interested,” Terrence said as he abruptly turned to walk away.

“How’s your father?” Junior called out. Terrence turned back around. Just then, he noticed that Bill was coming down the church steps. Bill looked over at Terrence and Junior, a concerned look on his face. Bill seemed like he was about to come over, but Terrence waved and gave Bill a thumbs-up. Bill continued down the stairs and slowly headed off in the opposite direction, briefly looking back over his shoulder as Junior continued talking.

“I know you were lying during that meeting back there. Your father died years ago. I remember my uncle mentioning it. But you still work at the firm he started. So, if you’re taking money from your father to finance your gambling, that means you gotta be...”

“Fuck you!” Terrence angrily walked away from Junior. Terrence’s heart felt like it was going to thump its way right out of his chest. It began to feel like the whole world was closing in on him. But he kept walking, propelled by an overwhelming need to get somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Terrence got to his car at the end of the block. He paused and looked back from where he had come. There was no one to be seen. Terrence slapped the hood of his car in anger and kept walking. He turned the corner, walked down one more block and opened a wood-framed door with a large glass panel in the center of it. The name “Mickey’s” was painted on the glass.

There was no one at the bar and only a couple of customers in a booth on the other side of the room. Terrence slid onto a stool at the end of the bar near the television. He ordered a shot of whiskey while leaning forward, anxiously looking up at the score on the screen and over at the glowing numbers representing the game clock.

“Yes!” Terrence shouted as he slapped his hand on the bar. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Browns fan?” asked the bartender, as he set the whiskey in front of Terrence, taking the money Terrence had placed on the bar.

Well, they’re my team for tonight anyway. Hell, my team FOREVER if they don’t score any more points by the end of the game.”

“Have some money on this one, do ya?”

“Yes. Some.”

Terrence couldn’t contain his excitement.

“I picked the Browns and...”

“Wait. You picked the BROWNS to beat the PATRIOTS?!?”

“Yes. I just had a feeling. Besides, the odds were really good.”

“I’ll bet!”

Terrence ignored the bartender’s bad joke.

“I have the Browns and I took the under.”

“What’s the over/under on this game?”

“40 points. As long as the Browns hold on to that lead – AND the score stays 20-18 for another... minute thirteen... I win twice!”

As Terrence watched the teams come to the line of scrimmage for the next play, he hung on every image, every tick of the clock, every word uttered by the announcers.

“Hey, can you turn that up a bit?” Terrence asked without looking away from the screen.

The bartender turned up the TV and walked over to the customer that he had just noticed waiting patiently behind him.

“Third and ten,” the announcer said. “If the Browns don’t convert, they’ll have to punt.”

“Okay. Get the first down, but no more... no more,” Terrence told the Browns, almost praying.

“Timeout,” intoned the announcer. “The Browns have called a timeout. Looks like they didn’t like what they saw from the defense. We’ll be right back.”

Terrence grabbed a napkin and started writing some dollar amounts. Then Terrence smiled broadly and picked up the napkin to admire what he had just written. Momentarily lost in his daydream, it took a moment for him to realize the game had returned.

“...back to pass... he’s got a receiver open... caught at the Patriots’ 45... just short of the first down marker... but there’s a flag on the field... that’s a facemask on the defense... tack 25 yards onto the end of that play and the Browns are in field goal range with 59 seconds to play...”

Terrence set down his napkin and finally drank his shot of whiskey as he nervously watched the next three plays... an incomplete pass... a 3-yard run... and then a sack... loss of 9... timeout.

Terrence looked down at his napkin, recalculating in his head and wondering what he would do if he won his underdog bet, but lost the over/under. He looked up to see the Browns’ field goal unit trot onto the field and set up for a kick that Terrence desperately needed them to miss.

The announcer continued, “The Browns are hoping to make this a 5-point game, forcing the Patriots to go the length of the field and get a touchdown with about 20 seconds to play... the kick is up and it’s... no good! The ball hit the left upright and bounced out!”

“YESSSSS!” Terrence practically squealed. But the announcer kept talking.

“Hold on. Flag on the play. Offensive holding. The Browns are going to have to kick again.”

“That’s okay,” Terrence reassured himself as he fondled his empty whiskey glass. “They’re even further back now. He’ll miss again. He’ll miss again.”

His eyes practically reached out to pull the TV closer as he watched and listened with an anxiety that he had never known before.

“Here’s the kick. It is... blocked! It’s blocked and the Patriots are running it back the other way! He’s at the 50... the 40... 30... 20... touchdown Patriots! And the game is over! The underdog Browns have once again snatched defeat from the jaws of victory! What – a – heartbreaker!”

Terrence's own jaw hung low in disbelief. His pounding heart felt as if it were literally going to break. His breathing was the only sound he could hear... until an evil cackle arose from the other end of the bar. It was Junior. As Terrence stared at him blankly, Junior stopped laughing, raised a glass towards Terrence, downed his drink, laid some money on the bar and walked out the door.

Terrence cringed as the elevator dinged when he reached his floor. It was early, but that didn't matter. He hadn't slept anyway. When the door opened, Terrence saw Gus, the off-duty cop working security for the firm, taking up his usual position between the elevator and the receptionist's desk.

Terrence shuffled towards his office with a dazed look on his face. His tie was crooked and he hadn't shaved. His secretary, June, stood up at her desk as she saw him approach.

"Are you okay?" June asked, shocked.

"Yeah, fine. Just not feeling well," Terrence mumbled.

"You have a visitor. He doesn't have an appointment, so I told him to wait over there," June said, nodding toward a small waiting area where a young man in a hoodie was smirking at Terrence through the glass walls. "What should I tell him?"

Terrence paused to think, swallowed hard and managed a half-hearted, "Show him in."

Terrence sat at his desk, doing his best to gather himself.

June opened the door and let Junior into the room.

"Thanks, June. Please shut the door," said Terrence.

As June complied, Junior sat in the armchair in front of Terrence's desk, leaned back and stretched his legs out in front of him.

"Good morning, counselor. It IS a good morning, counselor, don't you think?"

"What do you want?"

"Well, as I was watching football yesterday, I was thinking about our conversation. I understand you feel you're not in need of my services, but I was wondering if you'd like to make a contribution to my uncle's defense fund. You know, for his appeal."

"What makes you think..."

“I know money is a bit tight right now,” Junior interrupted. “But I’m sure you can come up with a small donation. That is, unless you’re interested in joining him. I have a feeling that your partners would be very interested to hear how you’ve been borrowing money from your father.”

Terrence didn’t notice that he had started perspiring and that his breathing had become labored. Suddenly it felt like a giant hand had just reached out and started squeezing his chest. Terrence tumbled to the floor with a bang. June looked through the glass walls, gasped and called out to Gus. They both burst into the room as Junior watched in stunned silence.

Soon, sirens began to wail in the distance. As the paramedics worked on Terrence, Gus looked at Junior, squinting his eyes. Then those eyes widened and he grabbed his cell phone, went back toward the elevator, made a call and then whispered something to the receptionist.

As soon as Terrence was strapped to the gurney and wheeled into the elevator, Junior finally saw an opportunity to slink away. When he reached the elevator, the receptionist called out to him, asking if he’d like to wait and see another attorney. Junior declined, as politely as he knew how, and reached out to press the down button. The elevator dinged. When the door opened, two uniformed police officers emerged. One of them looked at Gus who nodded in Junior’s direction.

“Terry Cortina?” asked the officer.

“Yeah. So?” responded Junior.

“You’re under arrest for loan sharking. You have the right to remain silent...”

There was a knock on the metallic frame of the open door. A man stood in the doorway holding a bouquet of flowers. “May I come in?”

“Bill!” Terrence was happy to see his new sponsor, but not quite as happy as he was to be alive.

Bill walked in and placed the flowers on the table next to Terrence’s hospital bed.

“Thanks so much for coming!”

“Of course. You called. I came. That’s the way it works. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay. They’re doing some tests, but they say I’ll probably go home tomorrow.”

“And how’s your wife?”

“Not bad. The next door neighbors are looking in on her. They’re going to try bringing her up here later today.”

“Yeah, about that. Remember when I said in the meeting that I had lost most of my inheritance before I stopped gambling?”

“Yes...”

“Well, I lost most, but not all of it. Listen, I remember meeting your wife when I ran into you two here at the hospital last month and I’ve gotten to know you at our meetings and during our phone calls. I sympathize with your situation. This isn’t usually done, so you’ll have to keep this between you and me, but I want to help. Call it a loan. I’ll make sure you get back on your feet and then we’ll work together on starting your new life free from gambling.”

Terrence was speechless. A single tear rolled down his cheek.

Bill patted him on the shoulder. “One day at a time, buddy. One day at a time.”
