

INT. JOHNNY'S FRONT ROOM - TIME LAPSE

The game is over. Bert is already in the front room. He sits at a table with a drink, and watches Eddie pass him by on the way to the bar.

EDDIE

Bourbon. J. T. S. Brown.

BERT

(to the bartender)

Two.

Eddie looks at Bert.

BERT

(pleasantly, to Eddie)

I'm buyin'.

EDDIE

Thought you only drank milk.

BERT

Only when I work.

EDDIE

Yeah? Why?

BERT

I like it. It's good for you. Besides, you start drinking whisky gambling and it gives you an excuse for losing. That's something you don't need -- an excuse for losing. How did you make out in the poker game?

EDDIE

I lost twenty bucks.

BERT

Poker's not your game.

EDDIE

What is?

BERT

Pool.

EDDIE

You being cute?

BERT

I don't think there's a pool player alive shoots better pool than I saw you shoot the other night at Ames. You got talent.

EDDIE

So I got talent. So what beat me?

BERT

Character.

EDDIE

(laughs)

Yeah. Sure, sure.

BERT

You're damned right I'm sure. Everybody's got talent. I got talent. You think you can play big-money straight pool, or poker, for forty straight hours on nothing but talent? You think they call Minnesota Fats the best in the country just 'cause he's got talent? Nah. Minnesota Fats's got more character in one finger than you got in your whole skinny body.

EDDIE

I got drunk.

BERT

He drank as much whisky as you did.

EDDIE

Maybe he knows how to drink.

BERT

You bet he knows how.

(sips his drink)

You think that's a talent too, huh? Knowin' how to drink whisky? You think Minnesota Fats was born knowin' how to drink?

EDDIE

Okay, okay ... What do I do now, lie down on the floor and, uh, bow from the ankles?  
What do I do, go home?

BERT

That's your problem.

EDDIE

So I stay. Stay until I hustle up enough to play Fats again. Maybe by that time I'll develop myself some character.

Amused, Bert gets up and joins Eddie at the bar.

BERT

Maybe by that time you'll die of old age. How much do you think you'll, uh, need?

EDDIE

A thousand.

BERT

No, three thousand at least. He'll start you off at five hundred a game -- he'll beat the pants off you. That's the way he plays when he comes up against a man who knows the way the game is. He'll beat you flat four or five games -- maybe more, depending on how, uh ... steady your nerves are. But he might -- he just might be a little scared of you, and that could change things. But I wouldn't count on it.

EDDIE

How do you know? Huh? When nobody knows that much?

BERT

See that big car parked out by the fireplug on the way in? Well, that's mine. I like that car. But I get a new one every year because I make it my business to know what guys like you and Minnesota Fats are gonna do. I made enough off of you the other night to pay for it twice over.

EDDIE

In that case, you owe me another drink.

Bert laughs and signals the bartender for another round.

BERT

Eddie, is it all right if I get personal?

EDDIE

Whaddya been so far?

BERT

Eddie, you're a born loser.

EDDIE

What's that supposed to mean?

BERT

First time in ten years I ever saw Minnesota Fats hooked, really hooked. But you let him off.

EDDIE

I told you. I got drunk.

BERT

Sure, you got drunk. That's the best excuse in the world for losing. No trouble losing when you got a good excuse. And winning! That can be heavy on your back too. Like a monkey. You drop that load too when you got an excuse. All you gotta do is learn to feel sorry for yourself. It's one of the best indoor sports: feeling sorry for yourself -- a sport enjoyed by all, especially the born losers.

EDDIE

(slaps down his glass and rises)

Thanks for the drink.

BERT

Wait a minute. Maybe I can help you.

EDDIE

To do what?

BERT

Get the three thousand. Play Minnesota Fats again.

EDDIE

Why?

BERT

Ten reasons. Maybe fifteen. And also there's something in it for me.

EDDIE

Oh yeah, I figured that. How much?

BERT

Seventy-five per cent.

EDDIE

For who?

BERT

For me.

EDDIE

That's a -- that's a pretty big slice. Who do you think you are, General Motors?

BERT

How much you think you're worth these days? I'm puttin' up the money, I'm puttin' up the time. For that I get seventy-five per cent return on my money -- if you win.

EDDIE

You think I can lose?

BERT

I never saw you do anything else.

EDDIE

You saw me beat Minnesota Fats for eighteen thousand dollars.

BERT

Look, you wanna hustle pool, don't you? This game isn't like football. Nobody pays you for yardage. When you hustle you keep score real simple. The end of the game you count up your money. That's how you find out who's best. That's the only way.

EDDIE

Why back me then? Why not back yourself? Go find yourself a big fat poker game and get rich You know all the angles.

BERT

I'm already rich. But I like action. That's one thing I think you're good for is action. Besides, like I say ... you got talent.

EDDIE



(pleased)

Yeah, you already told me that. You cut that slice down to bite-size and maybe we can talk.

BERT

No, we don't talk. I don't make bad bets. Seventy-five, twenty-five. That's it.

EDDIE

Kiss off.

He starts to go.

BERT

Hey, wait.

(beat)

What are you gonna do about the money?

EDDIE

There are places. I'll scuffle around.

BERT

Word's out on you, Eddie. You walk in the wrong kind of place and they'll eat you alive.

EDDIE

Now, when did you adopt me?

BERT

(with a friendly grin)

I don't know when it was.

Eddie exits.