

“The Con Man”



My friend Paul lies uncovered in his hospital bed, wrapped in a disposable diaper. His eyelids lazily droop, and I question if he is asleep.

“Paul,” I choke back my fears as he does not respond, “Buddy, can you hear me?”

Deafening silence fills the room. I take my time to closely examine his bloated face, and then my eyes slowly take in his withered legs.

Touching his hand I repeat, “Paulie, can you hear me?”

He slowly opens his eyes. He gives me the look of ---now is my chance to tell him.

His words are garbled as oxygen is forced into his nostrils and a clear plastic mask rests on his face. In a staccato manner, he spits out his message.

*“I was innocent...
You should have believed me...
The cops never should have jailed me...
It was oxygen deprivation. Not dope!”*

Paul now rests his eyes shut. He delivered his message.

Thirty days earlier, Paul had two strokes in rapid succession. Now his arms and one of his legs are paralyzed.

I think how ironic.

Throughout his life he had two paralytic strikes against him.

Paulie was a con man with a dark karmic cloud which clung to him as if he was magnetized metal, constantly pointing his moral compass in the wrong direction.

He loved the confidence game. He exploited his friends, family, and acquaintances through their weaknesses and virtues.

I met Paul on the first day of law school. He was obnoxiously loud for his short stature – a younger white hybrid version of that eighties TV favorite George Jefferson and TV’s favorite loser of the nineties George Costanza. He smoked incessantly as if his nervous system needed tobacco to thrive. Paul was a funny character, something right out of a Marvel comic book. Many of his classmates laughed with him, most at him. Paul desperately sought attention: a blend of insecurity, neurosis and dishonesty. As a twin, I rationalized his inordinate need for attention occurred when he and his brother shot out of the birth canal. Paul always acted like he would do anything for you. He not only acted, he did favors for people, but in his attempt to help he inexplicably made things worse. His heart seemed as big as his mouth. I never questioned his motives. I was the perfect mark.

Within a month he bragged, “I got hold of a telephone calling card. I’m charging calls all over the county for free.”

I warned him, “You’re going to get popped. All the phone company has to do is call your friends and ask who called you from New Orleans on such and such date.” He laughed at my innocence. At first, he lied when busted by the phone company claiming it wasn’t him. Later, he admitted his guilt and paid for a small portion of the calls.

A year later, he bragged, “Remember that Constitutional Law test that I said I got an ‘A’ on?”

“Yup, I could not believe you got a higher grade than me. I studied twice as hard as you did,” I replied.

“Well, one of my friends gave me the test questions before the exam.” He proudly recalled, “When I was called into the Dean’s office for questioning, I lied claiming I never saw the questions.”

Curiously I asked, “Did they make you take the test over?”

His smile contorted into a smirk as he admitted, “I had to. I ended up with a “C” in Con Law.”

Paul was smart enough to get his law degree and pass a state bar examination. He married his college sweetheart and had a son. For the next ten years he made a living practicing criminal law.

Paul telephoned once or twice a year. “What’s up bro? I bet you don’t recognize my voice.” He always bragged about his financial success. “I’m making money hand-over-fist. Life is real good. I got cases that are taking me all over the world.” I knew from our law school days to cut whatever number he gave me in half to get a little closer to the truth. We laughed and reminisced about the good ole days.

Then, two of Paul’s old friends resurfaced: alcohol and drugs. They seeped into his soul. His old friends made him stop working. He tricked his clients into paying fees while neglecting their cases, as well as their telephone calls. For this negligent behavior, the state bar suspended his license. While under suspension he tried to con a police officer into not giving him a speeding ticket by pretending to be a practicing lawyer. It

didn't work. He got the speeding ticket and lost his ticket to practice. Paul really did not lose it, he just flushed it away.

Now with no means of making an honest living, as well as his two destructive habits, Paul's hard-working wife wised up to his con game and gave up on him. She no longer would be his mark. She had lost confidence. She hoped and prayed he'd find a way to pay child support. He managed to make a few payments over the years. He even scammed himself into believing that his daily calls to his son made up for failing to support him.

Having represented the criminal element, Paul's next target was a big-time L.A. drug dealer. Paul became his jester, his defrocked mouth piece, his gopher and mule. In exchange for rendering these services, he earned his room, board and some pocket change to feed his habits.

One day, a shipment arrived at LAX. Paul's boss barked out an order. "Boy, here's the claim ticket, go to the airport, pick up the coke. It's in a red leather suitcase. You better not mess this up!"

Paul's hands shook as he reached out to take the stub and the car keys.

"Boss, I am east coast, can't one of the other guys do this? They know the airport better than I do."

The Boss laughed-out-loud, "Boy, it's time you earned your keep. Remember don't screw it up. There is hundred thousand dollars worth of dope in that suitcase. Every ounce of that dope better make its way into my grubby little hands. Do you hear me?"

Paul refused to look the boss in the eyes, staring at the tile floor as he whispered, "Yes, Sir."

As Paul drove the Dodge, his nostrils flared smelling a rotten deal. He knew the odds were against him making it out of the airport without getting busted. The confidence

man had no confidence. He was going to be the patsy. Feeling like a trapped rat, he knew his options were limited. Say no and die or go to the airport and hope for the best. When Paul picked up the red leather suitcase, he walked ten paces before he heard, “Put the suitcase down and slowly put your arms in the air.” Paul complied. He begged, “I was just doing a favor for a friend. I don’t know what’s in the bag!” In front of his eyes, the suitcase was opened exposing two cellophane wrapped bricks of cocaine hidden in some old shirts.

The lead cop yelled, “There’s enough coke here to get you twenty years in the slammer. You’ll die in jail, punk.” The officer looked at one of the rookie cops and demurely said, “Throw this clown in a cell and I’ll talk to him in a few hours.”

Paul thought about demanding a lawyer and then thought better of it. He was led away in handcuffs as tears streamed down his cheeks. The small-time con artist was going to do big time.

True to his word, the officer showed up in Paul’s cell four hours after his arrival. Paul’s face bloated from crying. His eyes were as red as the leather suitcase. The cop held Paul’s history in his hands, “You’re a pathetic loser, a con man without a brain. You’ve lost your career, your wife, your kid and now your freedom,” pausing to slowly enunciate, “for a long time.”

Paul knew what was going to be the next words out of the police officer’s mouth. “You rat on your buddies right now or we’re going to ask the DA to charge you with felony possession with intent to distribute. You will be lucky to be out in the year 2012.” He looked into Paul’s puffy eyes knowing he had flipped him as easily as a McDonald’s burger.

Paul did not stop squealing for the next two hours as the stenographer took down every word. He chain smoked only stopping for coughing attacks which slowed the flow of his confession. He begged the officer, "I need a drink; my throat is parched." Only to be told, "Con man, there is water on the table. That's all you're getting."

Paul had cut the deal of his life. In exchange for his testimony against the boss and his gang, Paul would not go to jail. He would be put in a witness protection program and given a new name and identity.

Paul knew that if boss' people found him before the trial, it would be the last deal of his life. When the boss was sentenced to twenty years, Paul was driving a cab in Atlanta.

The con man could not leave well enough alone. He started to gripe that the feds were not providing him with all they promised. He threatened to sue. And when he finally filed a claim against the Federal Government, he was thrown out of the program.

Paul realized his scamming skills could be put to the test as a used car salesman. He was right for a while; however, when the local economy headed south, so did Paul.

When Paul came to visit me, he asked, "How about a loan? I promise to pay you back."

I laughed a little too loudly, "Do I look like a subprime banker? If I gave you money it would ruin our friendship. You would never pay me back."

He replied, "How about getting me a job at the health department?"

"Paul, I don't think the health department has any jobs for a person with your skill set or qualifications. You are over qualified. Talk to me after you get a license."

How do you tell a con man/friend he is not welcome at your place of employment?

How do you tell a con man/friend that just because he lives on the internet, he's not qualified to teach abstinence or safe-sex?

How do you convince yourself that maybe this loser should not be your friend?

Aren't we all given a cross to bear?

Paul was always invited over for holiday meals. He brought his contagious laugh, his uncontrollable cough, and his signature dish of baked beans.

A few years later, Paul's Florida used car salesman career ended in failure. He was getting evicted; his car repossessed, and was losing his girlfriend, Mary, a washed-out sullen-faced recovering alcoholic. They met at an AA meeting. Mary had seen the dark side of life and was crawling toward the light. Mary put up with Paul's shenanigans for a few months, but dumped him when she realized he was scamming her out of her hard-earned cash. Paul could not and would not let go. He phoned her twelve times a day begging, "Please let me see you, just one more time. I'll do anything for you. I love you!"

Her response was clear, "It's over! Stop calling me. Stop harassing me. If you don't stop, I'm calling the cops. I'll have you arrested!" Mary yelled, "I don't love you!" as she slammed down the receiver.

Paul's family had given up on him years earlier. Not even his son could or would rescue him. Paul's last resort was me. The phone rang, "Buddy, how about letting me stay on your couch until I work things out?"

I sadly responded, “Paul, sorry there is no room for you in my home. The last time you stayed in my home, I literally had to throw you and your stuff out the door. Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“Well, since I don’t have any wheels, how about a ride to the homeless shelter?” he replied.

I answered, “I’ll pick you up at your apartment in one hour. Please be ready to leave when I get there.”

When I approached the apartment, I noticed the yellow sheriff’s three day eviction notice taped on the door. I walked into the studio which looked and smelled like a saloon. The room had not been cleaned in over a year. Empty beer cans and full ashtrays littered the floor. I wondered what it would have taken to get Paul to throw this mess into the dumpster. Sarcastically I said, “You sure know how to leave an apartment.”

Of course he had not packed his bags. I touched his desktop computer feeling the heat of use. As I waited, I pondered, “Does he think I am such a sucker that I’ll drive him to my house?” My angry silence did not bode well for his last hope.

Wordlessly, we drove toward the shelter. He shattered our silence with stoic words, “I’m going to treat this trip as another of life’s adventures. I’m a survivor. I should write my autobiography. It would sell a million copies and be on the New York Times best seller list.”

I smiled thinking, Paul, writing a book requires work; a word which shies away from your very being. Who will you trick into authoring it?

Seeing a diner on the side of the road, I pulled over and offered him a last supper. He ate his steak sandwich as if he was a condemned man. He washed it down with merlot. He belched out a loud, “Thanks for the meal buddy.”

At the locked gates of the homeless shelter, I gave Paul a big bear hug and bid him farewell, “Good luck! Try to be good!”

He signed in, looked straight ahead and with valise in hand marched past the now opened gate. He yelled back, “Don’t forget to call.”

Later, I heard from him that the shelter wanted to kick him out for violations of house rules. Paul was wheeling and dealing cigarettes and favors with the residents. His catch-me-if-you-can attitude was not appreciated by the staff. Before they threw him out, Paul collapsed.

His years of smoking lead to emphysema. His lungs were shot and now infected. Unable to breathe, he was knocking on death’s door. Hooked up to tubes pumping oxygen into his collapsed lungs, his son visited him and found it hard to express his love. With my coaxing, Paul’s son touched his hand beseeching him to get well. Someone was listening.

A miraculous recovery opened the door of his next scam. He applied for Social Security disability and got it. The government check paid his rent and minimal provisions. He acted like he had just won the lottery. No more homeless shelters in his life. He scammed a doctor with his back pain story to obtain governmentally funded narcotics. He grew old and obese on the government’s dime. His meager dole put him on a high-carb diet. He gained thirty pounds, only exercising his fingers on the keyboard or pressing down on his mouse while playing video games or searching for love online. To

my amazement, women online had con-dar (radar against con men) that protected them from this ilk. One exception was a stylish fifty-year old deceiver who managed to trick him into driving to North Miami Beach for dates. He spent his last three hundred dollars dating her. She suckered him with the promise of love. The con man never even got a kiss.

He was more successful with Sally, an elderly black woman, who lived in his apartment complex. In exchange for driving her to doctor's appointments, he was allowed to drive her car whenever he needed it. When he smacked into a telephone pole with damages to the tune of \$500, Paul said to Sally, "I'll repair it sweetheart." When Sally demanded, "Paul, when are you going to fix my car?" For months he replied, "Soon Sally, my dear." He never did repair the vehicle. He simply ignored her requests until she gave up.

Thirty days before Paul's my visit to the hospital, my phone rang at 8:30 on Sunday morning. An unfamiliar feminine voice said, "Hi, I'm Jane, a neighbor of Paul's and he's locked up." She continued, "He was charged with DUI. The police tested him while he was hospitalized and found drugs in his blood. The idiot drove his car into another telephone pole. Now, they moved him to the jail. He asked me to call you to bail him out."

I inquired, "What's the bail?"

"Five thousand dollars," Jane replied. "All you need to come up with is five hundred to a bail bondsman."

"Jane, give me your phone number please." I scribbled down her number and told her I'd call her back after I thought it over.

What would Moses, Jesus, or Mohammad do? Am I my brother's keeper? I opined that all three would say bail your friend out. What about Dr. Phil? Tough love. I called my friend, Lawrence, who practices criminal law. He speculated that Paul would be released by the judge within two days. He continued, "But it isn't a large sum of money and why not just bail him out?"

My wife and I discussed the pros and cons over freshly brewed coffee, and finally, she said, "Paul will not even show up for the bond hearing, and we will be out 5000 bucks." As I balanced all of these thoughts, I contemplated out loud Sally's automobile predicament, "Paul has no respect for other people's money or property." We nodded our heads in agreement, and I remarked as I sipped my coffee, "Paul will trick the guards to put him into the hospital. He's got emphysema. And besides, he'll be out in two days."

I phoned Jane, "Sorry, I've decided not to help Paul."

I had decided that our friendship had to come to an end. I never thought I'd see Paul again.

Now as I'm walking out of the hospital, I formulate my response to his guilt-trip message.

I was innocent.

Paul, your innocence is not the issue; the issue is your lack of character.

You should have believed me.

How could I believe you when your whole life has been a lie?

The cops never should have jailed me.

Maybe the police shouldn't have arrested you, but there were drugs in your blood
– sounds like probable cause.

It was oxygen deprivation. Not dope!

Paul, it may have been oxygen deprivation. But, I'm sorry; your old friend no is
longer a dope.

As I lie in my comfortable bed, wrapped in a quilt of memories, my eyelids lazily
droop and I ponder how Paul is doing...

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.