

THE FRIARS CLUB

“It was going so right, until it all went wrong.” Mark Friedman – December 22, 1967

The shame my father felt seeing his older brother Maury in handcuffs was too much for him to bear. The news hit me hard, too – the world I had been living in was crashing down on me, and I figured to be in handcuffs soon. My Dad had warned me about his brother many times, but I never listened. You see, even though my uncle used me, he didn’t think he was, and Maurice Friedman was still my hero. As a kid, I never knew for sure what he did. Yeah, I knew he was a big shot who ran casinos in Vegas. I knew he took care of his family. He had gotten my father a damn good job doing promotional work for those casinos and clubs on the strip. “Unk,” as I called him, had taught me every card game there was before I was six and by the time I was ten, craps was second nature to me. They say, there’s a bit of larceny in all of us, but there was a lot of it in my uncle. Being in Las Vegas for all those years made it second nature to him. He was always looking for an angle and he didn’t like getting beat. When he picked up the tab at a restaurant, and he always did, he examined the bill like an IRS agent. Anyway, he and a few of his pals from the Friars Club were in hot water... boiling hot. Let’s go back about eighteen months ago and find the day when it all started for me...

June 1966

I had just graduated from Fairfax High with a less than stellar GPA, and not many great memories. That summer looked bleak as well. I had a few friends, wasn’t athletic, never dated – might as well tell you, I had to go to my senior prom with my uncle’s adopted daughter, Barbara, who was three years older than me. School and I never mixed well, but my father who never gave up on me, had me enroll for the upcoming semester at LA City College. He considered me an “underachiever” and told me the only way I’d succeed is with an education. LACC was where kids that couldn’t get into good colleges or didn’t know what they wanted to do went. It was for dummies. But as time rolled on, it turned out I was no dummy. My father was old-school Jewish, and there I was, like on every sunny Saturday morning, cutting the grass, at my house on North Orange Grove Drive, in our upper middle-class neighborhood.

Looking up, in the distance I saw my uncle, MAURY FRIEDMAN driving toward my house in his baby-blue Cadillac convertible. Every time I saw him brought back the great times I shared with him growing up...

MARK – 6 YEARS OLD

Gin!

His opponent, his uncle – Maury Friedman, smirks and begins counting.

MAURY

Son-of-a-bi...

LEW FRIEDMAN stops him mid-swear.

LEW

Keep it clean! Why not teach him science, math,
spelling? Always with the card games.

MARK

This is kinda like math, Dad.

LEW

And he's a wiseguy.

Two dice clatter against a cement step, tumble, and land on a 5 and a 2.

MARK – 10 YEARS OLD

Seven, baby!

Maury shakes his head and throws some money on the patio. Lew is skimming the pool, hears the chatter and walks over to watch.

MAURY

You're killing me!

LEW

Always with the gambling.

Maury looks around the yard and at the pool, gesturing with his eyes that things are going pretty well for Lew.

MAURY

And you should complain?

Mark picks up the dice and blows on them.

MARK

Frankie needs a pair of shoes!

He throws the dice.

A car travels through Beverly Hills. MARK – 13 YEARS OLD, sits in the back seat dressed in a suit and his yamaka rests on his curly hair. He gazes out the window – impressed by the big

houses, chauffeurs' waiting by Rolls Royce's, sprinkler systems splashing onto the thick green lawns. They pull up to the Friar's Club.

MOTHER

So nice of Maury to have his party here.

LEW

Yeah.

(turning to Mark)

You're a man now. There'll be a lot of important people here, so mind your manners.

The family enters to cheers and handshakes.

A big banner stretches across the function room – HAPPY BAR MITZVAH

Envelopes are handed to a bewildered Mark who is soaking up the moment.

Mark watches his uncle meet and greet celebrities, millionaires, and a few gangster types... and he's awestruck. Envelopes are handed to his uncle; there are plenty of whispers and pull asides.

He took me and my cousin, Barbara, to Dodgers' games and introduced us to Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax. Those were great days. I guess he got too busy for me as I entered High School or maybe he wanted me to figure things out for myself. All I know is, every time I saw him made me happy.

He stepped out of the Caddy dressed like he always was: fancy shoes, tightly pressed slacks, a white shirt opened at the collar and a sports coat. As I greeted him with our usual hug, my father walked out to do the same.

MAURY

Okay I take him for a ride?

LEW

He's cutting the grass.

MAURY

Why don't you get a Mexican to do it?

LEW

I don't want a Mexican to do it. I want him to do it.

My uncle looked at me and shrugged, then looked at my father.

MAURY

You making money with the Frontier account?

My father nodded.

LEW

Come in for coffee. Got some beautiful bagels.
He can go with you after he finishes the lawn.

My uncle put his arm around his younger brother and walked him into the house. They were so close, yet their philosophies on life were so far apart. My uncle lived life with gusto, but I can't remember once, when I left to go out of my house that my father didn't tell me to "be careful."

Riding in the Caddy was always a treat. My father drove a Chevy and every once in a great while I got to borrow it.

MAURY

So what are you doing for the summer?

A simple question, right? But that one simple question was going to take me on the ride of my life.

He drove into Westwood and UCLA's campus, pulled up to the Administration Building and stopped the car.

MAURY

I have friends here. You think you can pass the classes?

He told me he had enrolled me and that LA City College was out. My jaw dropped. UCLA was where the smart kids and the great athletes went. I asked how. He just gave me a look. Then he told me he had a summer job for me, and that I could do it part-time while in college and the job came with a car. My head was spinning. I was cutting my lawn a half-hour ago, holding a losing hand, then out of nowhere I caught an ace, and my life and future was on a hot streak.

Incredible as it seems my straight-as-an-arrow father went along with it. My head was still in the clouds when two days later I pulled up to the Friars Club in Beverly Hills in my new convertible Mustang. My Bar Mitzvah was there, and I must have driven by the club with my Dad a thousand times since. Today I was going back into that windowless giant white block of modern architecture.

My uncle met me in the lobby and brought me up to the third floor to introduce me to BEN TEITLEBAUM, a slick LA businessman who collected art, owned a film and TV equipment rental company and a string of high end stores and restaurants. Ben was playing gin-rummy with a few guys. One of them was PHIL SILVERS the comedian, and another was my idol, DEAN MARTIN. When he saw us he finished his hand by declaring "gin."

BEN

Add it up boys. I gotta go. Great game.

PHIL SILVERS

For you, you son-of-a- bitch. You take my money
faster than my wife.

The guys all laughed. Then he introduced me to the players. There I stood shaking hands with Dean Martin and Phil Silvers. It was like a dream.

Over lunch, Ben told me I'd be working for his shoe store in Beverly Hills, delivering shoes to high-end clients, and that I was never to talk to anyone unless they talked to me first. Seemed simple enough.

The next day I went to The Princess Boutique on Rodeo Drive and was handed two shoe boxes sealed with packing tape, by the store's manager, MITZY REUBEN. I took the boxes, but my eyes were on something else.

MITZY

The addresses are on the boxes. And that's my niece
you're staring at, so watch it.

SARAH REUBEN was my age and had worked at the store for a couple of summers. She was attending UCLA as well, in the fall. She was beautiful and I was an oaf, but I smiled at her anyway.

MITZY

We'll see you tomorrow.

MARK

Tomorrow? This is all I'm delivering?

MITZY

These are very, very expensive shoes. Put them in
your trunk, and don't lose sight of your car with these
boxes. Never open a box. These are very, very serious
customers.

MARK

What do I do if they're not home?

MITZY

They'll always be home. But, in that one in a million
chance they're not – they've had a stroke, or a heart
attack, or they've drowned in their pool, you take the
shoes back here.

So, off I went and delivered the shoes to two LA homes and was done for the day by eleven a.m. It was like that whatever day they called me to work, that is, *when* they called me to work. It was part time for sure, but my paycheck wasn't. I was getting paid for a full week, in cash, when I only was working five or six hours a week. I also got up the nerve to ask Sarah Reuben out for a date, and to my shock, she said yes.

My life had never been better. I was in love with a gorgeous girl who was Jewish - which made my parents happy. Classes at UCLA were a breeze for me and I was making new friends. Everything changed for me – especially the way I dressed. I got to sit in on a few gin games at the club and met movie stars, comedians, and even mobsters. They were inviting me to their shows, restaurants, and giving me tickets to the Rams and Dodgers games. My job was stress-free and I was flying high... until it all crashed...

“It wasn't for the money; at first... it was personal.” Maury Friedman - 1967

1962

I was pissed-off after losing \$300 bucks to TED BRISKIN, so while in Vegas; I took WARNER RICHARDSON to breakfast. He worked for me as the Frontier's Casino manager in Vegas, and if anyone knew about cheating, he did.

MAURY

That prick, Briskin always beats me at these gin games. He's cheating!

WARNER

C'mon, for Chrissakes! He's a good player.

MAURY

Nobody's that good.

And that's how this whole mess started. Briskin thought he was slick, being married to Betty Hutton, he saw himself as a Hollywood guy. He was just a schmuck from Chicago, and I was going to teach that son-of-a-bitch a lesson. The gin-rummy games were played on the top floor of the Friars Club in an oversized room with high ceilings, and as time rolled on the stakes kept creeping up, and these players who pretended the games were friendly, were out for blood. Being a decent gin-rummy player myself, I couldn't understand how I always lost.

Then one day I got suspicious... Ted Briskin and Phil Silvers seemed to be doing a lot of talking at the table and a lot of winning. *Were these bastards talking in code? Signaling each other?*

BRISKIN

What's the ceiling for the next game?

PHIL SILVERS

Whatever you want, sweetie-pie.

As they talked and dealt the cards my suspicions grew. I snuck a look at the ceiling and got an idea. We had EYES IN THE SKY cameras in the casinos. Maybe I could put a spotter up there and somehow have them send signals to me. I had no idea how to do it, but thought it might work.

Warner knew everything about cameras and casino security. At first he thought I was crazy, and that the cost of setting up something like that was too much to undertake to win back a few hundred bucks.

MAURY

Then we go after all of them.

WARNER

What do you mean, all of them?

MAURY

Who's ever in the games.

WARNER

C'mon, these games are friendly.

MAURY

Friendly, my ass. These guys are the sharpest gin-rummy players in the world.

WARNER

Then they'll know.

MAURY

Over time, talking half a million, easy.

WARNER

You can't win every hand.

MAURY

We get all these Hollywood big shots to lose. Tony Martin, Phil Silvers, Zeppo Marx and his Brothers, Harry Karl... all egos who got plenty of dough. We pick and choose, but at the end of the day we come out on top.

WARNER

You gonna live at the table?

MAURY
I'll need a couple of guys.

WARNER
More guys, more trouble.

MAURY
Not if they're making money.

WARNER
You serious?

MAURY
One hundred percent.

WARNER
You're one fucking crazy Jew.

Warner got me an electronics expert, WILLIAM DOUGLASS, to devise a system with me. It looked like it could work so I had to figure a way to get him into the ceiling. He showed up one day in a van and told the guards he was checking out the ventilation and air conditioning systems, and the rest is history. Money began to roll in and the looks on the loser's faces was priceless.

Over time the first system faltered so we hired GEORGE SEACH, another expert to make things run smoother. Then he went to jail for other matters. But we hired an electronics engineer EDWIN GEBHARD to modernize our system. They were all paid well and kept quiet. A wise decision, because one of our associates made a mistake and JOHNNY ROSELLI had to take care of things. Yeah, Johnny Roselli, the mobster. I'll get to him in a minute.

Over time I had added beneficiaries to my scheme. A housekeeper and a janitor kept our spotters safe in the ceiling and provided duplicate keys to every room and closet. The scam was getting too big for me to handle alone, and I needed new players to win, so I brought in AL MATHES, a restaurateur and he brought in Ben Teitlebaum.

Johnny Roselli was my mistake. I had known him for half my life and he ran things for "The Chicago Outfit" in Vegas, so we were friends. When he saw the winning, he figured something was up. I was a schmuck! I should have started losing and cooled the operation down. Because of Roselli, the FBI got tipped off and started shadowing him, and the whole shebang went up in smoke. He should have never been a Friar, but Frank Sinatra (on the Q.T.) convinced Georgie Jessel, a founder of the club, to sponsor him. Jessel told the board that "There were other members who had served sentences and anyone who had paid his debt to society was O.K.," so he made him a Friar. Roselli was charismatic, and he and the Rat Pack and Hollywood guys got along great – they liked hanging with a mobster, and we took them for a bundle. Roselli knew how to make money – illegally that is, and with me always between Vegas and LA, I figured he'd be the perfect guy to watch things... and I kind of trusted him.

The flow of cash was incredible, but too much talk expanded my little circle into a complicated mess. The Detroit mob that I ran the Frontier Hotel and Casino for was now getting their beak's wet from the games, and Roselli and his Chicago "Outfit" were also getting a healthy percentage. Every stuck-out hand was asking for more money, dissatisfied with their cuts. I needed to spread the cash around to my partners so we devised a shoe delivery scheme, running out of Ben Teitlebaum's Beverly Hills shoe store. The money was stuffed in shoes, neatly wrapped in shoe boxes. Our bag man decided to get curious one day. Curiosity killed the cat... it was actually Roselli who did.

That's when I got my nephew involved. Delivering those shoes and never asking any questions, he did a good job for a year and a half, until it all went up in smoke. I never had my own kids, so he was like a son to me. I watched him grow from a sloppy schlump of kid to a slick young man. He was a stand-up kid, even after Mitzy Rueben's niece, Sarah – his girlfriend, tipped him off about her suspicions of our last delivery guy opening up a box. Mark never asked any questions. I'd take the kid with me to the club now and again. He sat in on a few games and was well liked by the players and the staff.

We beat hundreds of players over the 5 years. The bigger the stakes, the more new pigeons wanted into the games. Draining their money was great, but watching the blood draining from their faces when they lost was better. Celebrities and fat cats were our marks and no matter how much we fleeced them; they always came back for more. Except for one... ALAN TAYLOR, a prominent Beverly Hills banker and an A+ gin player, started to lose big. So big his wife, RUTH, found out through their checkbook and started asking questions.

RUTH

You lost fifteen thousand dollars playing gin?!

ALAN

The games are crazy now. We used to play for a few hundred dollars, here and there. Nobody got hurt. Now these guys are out for blood.

RUTH

But, you're such a good player.

ALAN

That's why I keep playing. Thinking I can win. The luck these guys have.

RUTH

Who the hell you playing against?

ALAN

The regulars and a few new guys. It's not like your Wednesday gin games with the girls.

RUTH
Who's winning?

ALAN
Maury Friedman, Ben, this guy Johnny Roselli.

RUTH
The gangster?

ALAN
He's a member. Sinatra...

RUTH
Maybe your luck will change.

That's all it took. One pain-in-the-ass wife with a schmuck of a husband. His luck didn't change and Ruth Taylor complained about it to the ladies at her Wednesday morning gin club. They were a 1960's version of The Housewives of Beverly Hills and they were all crazier than the other, and blabbermouths. One was married to an FBI agent and after weeks of hearing about the Friars Club gin games, she convinced her agent husband to "look into things." With Johnny Roselli in the games they had no problem "looking into things." The FBI put a plant in the games and after a few weeks of consistent losing, figured something was up. They went in on a Saturday dressed in white overalls, carrying fancy electronic devices and my little enterprise went kaput.

In Beverly Hills, sat a uniquely modern-shaped building called the Friars Club, a men's-only fraternity where all the Hollywood big shots and wealthy businessmen hung out. It was started by comedian Milton Berle and other founders in 1947 as a sort of spin-off from the NY Friars Club. It was a philanthropic organization that supported the arts and other worthy charities.

To join, you had to be sponsored by two members. Initiation was expensive and the monthly dues weren't cheap. Members called it their "Home Away From Home," where they could hang with friends, have a few drinks, play cards and kibitz, and unwind, away from the public's eye.

On the third floor, card games dominated the space, mostly gin-rummy, poker, and even bridge for the old-timers. A guard stood at a mirrored entrance door letting members and their guests in.

The club was dominated by celebrities; Bing Crosby, Ronald Regan, Jimmy Durante, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Jack Benny – to name a few.

In 1962, a member by the name of Maurice (Maury) Friedman masterminded a card-cheating scheme that would ultimately be uncovered by the FBI. Five men would be indicted and both the Detroit and Chicago mob syndicates would be involved.

The cheating was discovered by accident. A disgruntled player whose wife found out about his big losses had a connection with the FBI, and when they found out Johnny Roselli was involved, they investigated the card room and stumbled onto the setup. One Saturday morning, as the club was awakening, they inspected the card room where Roselli spent most of his days, and after four hours figured out that players were being spied on through holes in the ceiling above the tables. They found electronic devices that would send signals to the cheating players below.

Six months later, a grand jury subpoenaed 75 witnesses.

For five years (1962-1967) Friars Club members had been fleeced by the scam.

Hollywood's elite had lost close to \$4,000,000 (in today's money) and would have continued to fork over more, never realizing they were being cheated.

The list of suckers was a Who's Who of Hollywood – The Marx Brothers, Phil Silvers, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Jack Benny, Milton Berle and more. Millionaire businessmen lost big and many were too embarrassed to testify or come forward.

The government charged five culprits with conspiracy, fraud, racketeering, tax evasion, and more, totaling – 49 counts.

The five men charged:

Developer of the Frontier hotel-casino in Las Vegas - Maurice "Maury" H. Friedman

Los Angeles-based Chicago Mobster – Johnny Roselli

Frontier Casino manager - Warner T. Richardson

Beverly Hills professional gambler – Ricky Jacobs

Wealthy art collector/businessman - Benjamin J. Teitelbaum

The trial lasted six months and lot of court shenanigans took place – payoffs of witnesses not to testify, payoffs of witnesses to lie, pointing fingers at witnesses claiming the defendants had been shaken down for money, issues with statutes of limitations, and witness intimidation.

The headlines shook Hollywood –

THE JOKER IS WIRED AT FRIARS CLUB

FRIARS MYSTIFIED OVER FBI RAID

ELECTRONICS EXPERT ADMITS HE FIXED FRIARS CLUB FOR CHEATING

The losers were both pissed-off and embarrassed, but took it like men.

JUDGE

Mister Silvers, do you have any idea exactly
how much you lost over the past five years?

PHIL SILVERS

Well, your honor... let me explain it this way...
to come here today from Beverly Hills, I had
to take a bus.

In January, 1969 all were found guilty except for Warner Richardson, who was acquitted.

Maurice Friedman got 6 years and a \$100,000 fine (\$860,000) in today's money
Johnny Rosselli got 5 years and a \$55,000 fine (\$475,000) in today's money
Ricky Jacobs got 4 years and a \$5,000 fine (\$43,000) in today's money
Ben Teitelbaum got 4 years and a \$75,000 fine (\$648,000) in today's money

The gin-rummy games never stopped at the Friars Club...