

Attempting to smoke ten premium cigars – especially potent Cubans – in one day is both asinine and ridiculous. But when the gauntlet is thrown at your feet, a real man's man never backs down from a challenge.

When Jimmy Connelly makes a wager – and you've got a shot at clipping him for a thousand bucks – you do everything possible to take the old boy down. But trust me, this wasn't about the money. We're talking about greater issues: honor, dignity, and self-respect.

the sweetest smoke...

by Tom Zarzecki
Illustrations by Christine Fusco

Jimmy (or J.C., as he likes to be called, because he believes he can walk on water) was asked to be the best man in my buddy Tony Brunella's wedding. I would be a groomsman, along with Philly Cohen, a neurotic little print broker from Hackensack, New Jersey. Besides having breath that could knock a bear from a tree, Phil also possesses an insatiable lust for NFL teaser bets (a.k.a. *sucker* bets) and an uncanny gift for hitting one half of the Meadowlands daily double. Yeah, our little wedding party instantly became a crude, off-color joke: "Did you hear the one about the Italian, the Irishman, the Polack, and the Jew?"

I was truly happy for Tony; we go back a long way. But, with Connelly involved, we all knew this would be no simple wedding. Calling the Brooklyn-bred Irish tough-guy "abrasive" is one hell of an understatement; being around him is like running a marathon in a sandpaper jockstrap: extra-gritty. He's the classic hard-nosed, alpha-male whose acerbic demeanor becomes even more charming after some quality time with a bottle of Jameson.

But the son of a bitch likes me. Maybe it's because I'm the brunt of his ongoing Polish jokes. ("Hey fellas, how do ya



My mouth tasted like a fire at the Bridgestone factory and my wife burned my clothes in an oil barrel...

break a Polack's finger? Ya punch him in the nose!" If I had nickel for every time he told that, I'd buy the prick a new personality.) Or, it could be that we share a passion for fine cigars and sinful libations (the Cubano-laden walk-in humidor in Jimmy's den is only rivaled by his insanely decadent wine collection). But, maybe the *real* reason is that he made a king's fortune in commissions trading stocks for me during the dot-com

...ever

explosion; he got me into AOL and Cisco before they were hot and, even better, got me *out* before they tanked. There's no question, J.C. is damned good at what he does... and he lets me know it *every single time I see him*.

Now, Tony B. – *there's* a great guy. From an Italian neighborhood on the Jersey side of the GWB, he's a jock-turned-well-to-do-lawyer for a prominent firm specializing in securities law (that's how he and Connelly became pals). At age forty, Tony was biting the proverbial bullet and taking a crack at the bliss known as married life.

bar, then, of course, a bawdy time at a very exclusive and very expensive gentlemen's club on the Upper West Side.

It was a gorgeous September morning – crisp blue sky, the scent of new-mown grass filling the air. Having breakfast on the patio of Jimmy's club, we awaited our nine o'clock tee time. As always, Philly was late.

"Check *this* out," Jimmy said with a Cheshire-cat grin as he gently set a hefty rosewood humidor on the table. When he cracked open the lid, the most beautiful sight we'd ever seen was before our very eyes: two Spanish-cedar tiers of

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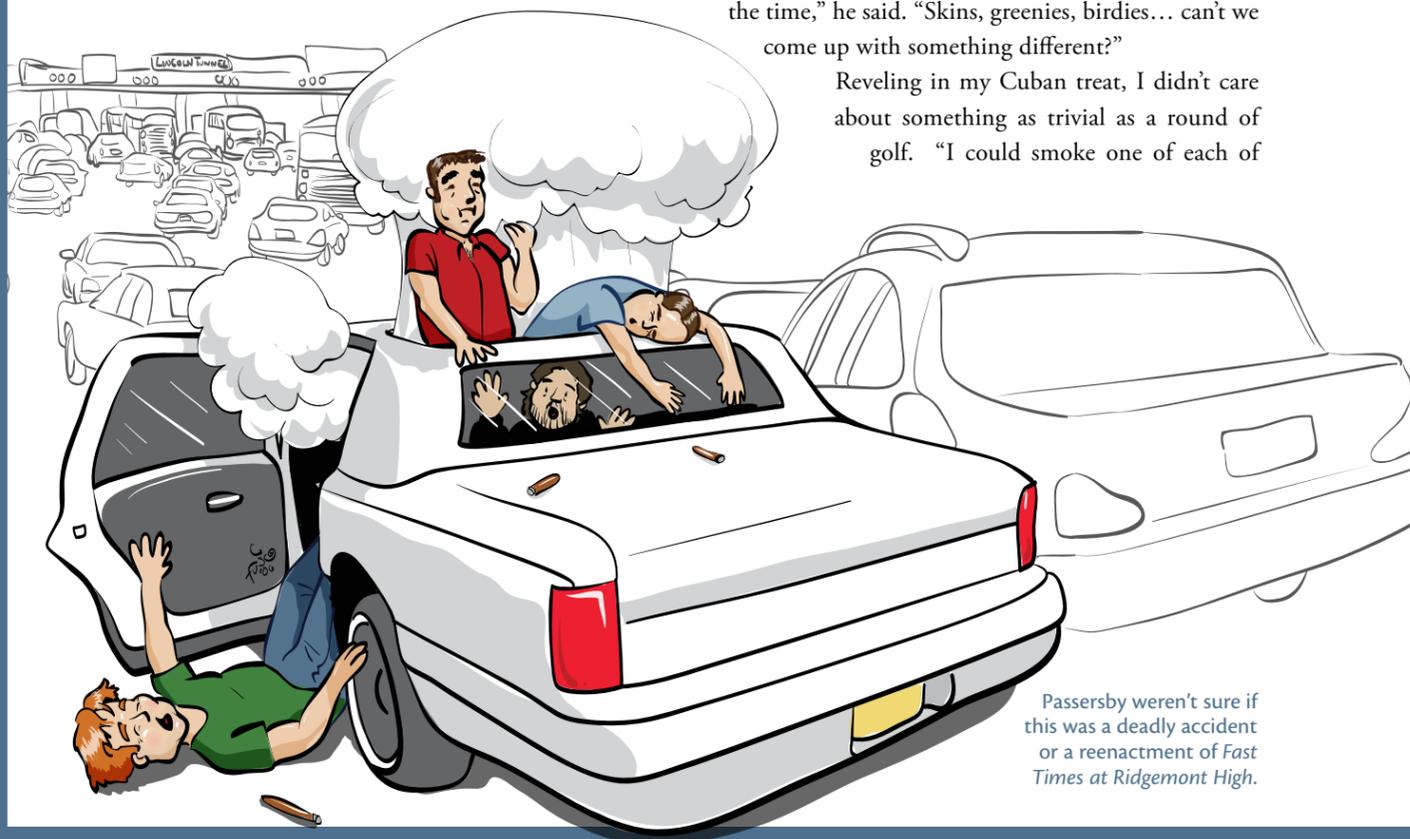
Since every wedding has to have a great bachelor romp, Jimmy C., sparing no expense, set up a boys' day out. The guy may have the personality of a torn groin muscle, but he sure as hell ain't cheap. Top-Shelf Jimmy (as he's known by his acquaintances) organized a hedonistic day of fun that most men wouldn't experience in a year's time: eighteen holes of golf, a limo into Manhattan, dinner at a four-star steak house, cognac and port wine at New York's most prestigious cigar

pristine Habanas. There must have been fifty, each one oilier than the last, calling out our names like sirens in the night.

"Don't just sit there like a couple of drooling Neanderthals," J.C. ordered. "Dig in!" Better than any breakfast, the three of us enjoyed a sublime Punch Punch with our pregame coffee.

Looking up from the cloud of fragrant, blue smoke that circled his head, Tony wondered aloud what we'd bet on to make today's round interesting. "We do the same crap all the time," he said. "Skins, greenies, birdies... can't we come up with something different?"

Reveling in my Cuban treat, I didn't care about something as trivial as a round of golf. "I could smoke one of each of



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these bad boys today," I said, taking the last puff right down to the label. "I mean it."

"I was thinking the same thing," Tony replied. "I'd smoke you guys under the table."

"Get lost, Tony," I snarled. "You couldn't outsmoke me if you tried. I published a stogie mag, remember?" (For details on that endeavor, see "Glamour, Glitz, and Glory," *CM*, Summer 2006.)

Never to be outdone, Jimmy's bravado stepped up to the plate and tapped the dirt from its cleats. "You losers are outta your league. I started smoking Camels when I was six," he spat in his trademark superior way. "If you think you could *ever* outdo me, put your money where your mouths are. *Nobody* can smoke more cigars than me."

Tony: "\$250 says I'll blow you guys away."

"Five hundred says I outlast the group," I responded with confidence.

But because J.C. has a chip on his shoulder so big you'd need an M1 tank to blow it off, he just can't keep his mouth shut. "I'll put up a thousand bucks. Whoever smokes the most cigars of equal brand and size over the next twenty-four hours takes the money."

Like I said, when J.C. makes a challenge – and you've actually got a shot at rubbing his nose in his own droppings – you do *anything* to take that pretentious dirtbag down. Tony and I were in!

Glancing at his diamond-encrusted gold watch, Jimmy barked, "Where the *hell* is Cohen? They're strict about tee-off times! You've got his number," he said to me. "Tell him if he's not here in *ten minutes*..."

Just as I reached for my phone, Philly came running over, wheezing like the grossly out-of-shape dork he is. "Phil! Shut up, sit down, and listen!" Jimmy said with all the patience of Saint Rottweiler. "Nobody loves a good wager more than you, so here's the deal: you're spottin'

five Franklins – and guess what? You're already behind. Zarzecki will explain. Now let's tee off."

After two holes, we broke out the big clubs – Hoyo Double Coronas – but Philly was still playing catch-up, puffing as fast as he could on his Punch. This was a bizarre wager indeed, and one I wasn't completely sure I could win. Tony and Phil were no match, but Jimmy is so excessive... forget about winning, he'll do anything *not to lose*. Remember the *Twilight Zone* episode where the braggart bet a million bucks he could stay silent for a year – and cut out his vocal chords to ensure victory? Yep, *that's* Jimmy.

This wager called for the intake of a lot of cigars, but, at that point, the most I'd ever smoked in one day was six – and all I remember is that my mouth tasted like a fire at the Bridgestone factory and my wife burned my clothes in an oil barrel. Somehow I knew that the magic number would be around ten to take Connelly down. Pacing myself and watching what I ate and drank was key... along with saying a few novenas and praying to Tobaccus, patron saint of cigars.

We each toked a Sir Winston Upmann on the back nine and then a celebratory Partagas Serie D for a round well played. *Wow*, two in the afternoon and we'd each smoked *four* Cubanos! I actually felt fine and, of course, J.C. was still in gear. But Tony wasn't faring too well and Philly's face resembled the practice tee.

Showers and fresh duds seemed to revive the boys. While waiting for our limo, Philly grabbed the 42-ring-gauge Vegas Robainas, figuring we may as well get the little guys out of the way. Good Lord, five apiece and the day was still young. This was a bet we *all* wanted to win.

With the sound of crackling gravel, a ponderous stretch limo made its way up the drive, and four wagering morons who reeked of old-man stogie stench hopped in with the rosewood humidor. Connelly broke out the single malt.

About forty-five minutes and several tankards of scotch later, I cranked open the treasure box. "Okay," I smiled.

Though I was ready to hurl, I reminded myself that
I was on a mission.

“Who’s up for Monte No. 2s?”

Jimmy tried to appear nonchalant. Was Mr. Top-Shelf starting to feel it? Seriously shitfaced, I wasn’t feeling much of *anything* as we puffed away on round number six.

Suddenly, Phil’s face looked funny – like a cross between Keith Richards and a diseased poodle! He started to panic: “I can’t breathe! And I can’t see either!”

“You look like garbage,” Jimmy replied. “But you’re right; it’s like goddamned London in here!”

“Stupid asses,” said Tony. “Open the windows!”

In the Jersey traffic just outside the Lincoln Tunnel, Jimmy finally found the window button. The glass opened, unleashing a mushroom cloud like in those black-and-white films of A-bomb tests, and four grown men bobbed their heads out the roof. A good Samaritan, thinking we were trapped in a five-alarm blaze, leapt from his car to open our side door and, as more smoke billowed out, we spilled onto the pavement. Passersby weren’t sure if this was a deadly accident or a reenactment of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.

Smoked out and a bit roughed up, we arrived at the steak house. We walked to our table to a chorus of remarks like, “*They look like hell!*” and “*Those guys smell disgusting!*”

“Speaking of disgusting,” Phil said, shaking his head, “I’m out. My five hundred is up for the winner.”

“Screw it, I’m out too,” Tony joined in. “I want to enjoy my dinner and my party, and *not* end up a friggin’ corpse for my wedding. Looks like there’s a grand on the table.” Jimmy immediately looked my way, just waiting for me to bow out too. *F him*, I thought. *I’m taking Mr. Lucky Charms down!*

“I’ve got a nice big Romeo Churchill for you, J.C.,” I said with what I hoped was brazen cockiness. “Ready to fire ‘em up?”

“*Whoa, Tom-mee Zee!*” Philly yelled. “You’re either completely insane or your *cojones* grew three sizes today!”

“Just gimme the cutter and the lighter,” Jimmy snapped, visibly perturbed.

Dinner was just what the doctor ordered. You know the

old proverb, “Man cannot live by scotch and cigars alone.” And after seven Cubans, I was running on pure adrenaline while Jimmy was strictly motivated by fear. Like I said, it wasn’t about the money – for *any* of us.

We climbed back into the limo to the putrid stench of stale smoke and realized that it was senseless to hit the cigar bar. The vote was unanimous: next stop, gentlemen’s club.

As usual, there was a big commotion near Times Square, bringing midtown traffic to a complete halt. But just because our car was at a dead stop didn’t mean our contest had to be. To the disbelief of my compadres, I removed two Diplomaticos from the humidor and ran them under my nose with an exaggerated whiff. Tony and Phil laughed, but J.C. just rolled down his window to scream at the traffic. Meanwhile, I snipped the ends and held one out to the very reluctant Irishman... who then completely lost it.

“You’d do *anything* to take Jimmy down!” (You know he’s really pissed when he refers to himself in the third person.) “Well Jimmy’s not goin’ down! Jimmy’s stronger than *all* of you!”

The rest of us sat, jaws on the floor, while, without another word, Jimmy took the Diplomatico, lit it, and stared out the window, puffing in silent fury.

The line at the club was a mile long, mimicking the days of Studio 54. For a strip joint, this was as elite as it gets – doormen with top hats, maitre d’s in tuxes. Because Jimmy was a regular, it would only be a “brief” forty-five-minute wait. Whaddaya know? Just enough time for a Bolivar Belicoso. And though I was ready to hurl, I reminded myself that I was on a mission.

Tony handed one cigar to me and one to Jimmy. Resembling a western shootout, we turned and faced each other. I was hurting; after eight Cuban cigars, God knows how much scotch, and a big steak dinner, I wasn’t sure if I had anything left to give. I wiped my brow and noticed that the sweat was yellow with nicotine. But, as disgusting as I felt, I was closer than ever to bringing Jimmy Connelly down.

We looked into each other’s eyes and I could almost hear that music from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*... that distinct whistle that ends with “wah, wah, *waaaah*.” We drew our puros, cut the ends, and fired them up. As we smoked, we stared at each other with an eerie silence. I raised an eyebrow and J.C. responded with a half-ass smirk. The cigar world had never seen this much drama. Or stupidity.

After twenty-five minutes, someone asked what the hell was going on. Philly whispered that it was the world’s first cigar duel, and that it was only a matter of time until someone was brought down. He meant it only figuratively, but then... J.C. actually dropped to one knee! *Then* his ass hit the pavement! We all ran – or, in my case, limped – over to him.

He looked as if he’d just seen the tunnel of white light, and had been told to go back... because no one up there wanted him either.

“I’m done. You win, Zarzecki,” he croaked. “I can’t go any further. You all are my witnesses: Tom Z. wins the money.”

“Thank God!” Tony exclaimed. “We couldn’t wait all night for you idiots to kill each other.”

As we took off for home, Tony and Phil, pleased with my victory, handed me their money. Jimmy then pulled out a wad of cash and methodically counted off ten brand-new hundred-dollar bills, pulling hard on each to make a distinct sound. Maybe it was the scotch, or the nicotine buildup in my brain, but I swear that Mr. Franklin winked and smiled at me with every snap of a bill.

Nestled into their respective corners of the limo, everyone closed their eyes and fell asleep. Everyone except me, that is. Sure, I’d won two grand, and that was awesome. *But did I really beat J.C.?* Technically, we’d smoked nine cigars each – until *that* moment. I opened my window and reached one more time into the rosewood humidor. I pulled out a pristine Cohiba Esplendido, gently cut it, and gave it a few pulls.

Wow. This was one for the ages. I took down *the* Jimmy Connelly, perhaps the biggest braggart, hard-ass motha that ever roamed this earth. And there was no question that my tenth – and final – Cuban cigar of that memorable day was the sweetest and most satisfying I have ever smoked in my life. **CM**

