

"You can't put that in the book. It's too good!" - BRANDON CANTU, 2xWSOP, 1xWPT



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POKER TILT



♠♦ POKER TILT ♣♥

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Dedicated to Michele Cospè and Eva Seibert.
- D.B.

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- L.S.

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INTRODUCTION

It's the summer of 2003, and poker isn't cool yet....but it's about to be.

Last week I made my way into the *Big Dance*, which is what old timers call the World Series of Poker Main Event. The buy-in is \$10,000 and this year the entry numbers have soared to 839 players, all vying for the first place prize of a cool \$2.5 million dollars and the immortality that will come from being crowned poker's world champion.

The stakes are higher than ever this year. ESPN decided to take a chance that people might actually watch a bunch of guys folding hands and throwing chips around a green felt table. They are taking poker primetime, with planned TV coverage spanning seven episodes. We're not talking about the low-budget Discovery Channel poker coverage I grew up with. No, we're talking ESPN airing poker in a primetime slot where everybody will be watching. They are going to make stars out of us.

You sometimes hear of people talking about that surreal feeling of having a date with destiny. I didn't really understand what they meant until now. There are moments in your life where everything comes together and it feels like everything you've done and everything you will do has all been planned out. That's how being the chip leader on Day 4 of the WSOP Main Event feels. As I look down at my chips, well over a million now, I can't shake the feeling that I have already won. I'm just living the memory.

Most of the major threats are gone and only two tables remain. Phil Ivey is still in the hunt and playing strong, but he's at the other table and I won't have to worry about him until tomorrow. Former champ "Action" Dan Harrington is also at the other table. He'll probably be the guy I'll beat headsup.

There are a few other familiar faces standing in the way of my championship. A European named Marcel is loud and boisterous, but plays incredibly tight. He's supposedly the best player in the Netherlands. A flashy Lebanese guy

named Sammy reminds me of Tony Montana from the movie *Scarface*. Sammy is sporting a WSOP bracelet he won in the 90s, so he's obviously been around the game for a while. An Iranian pro named Amir who I recognize from some LA tournaments. Amir is fresh off a bracelet win. A pro named Jason Lester, who Bartholdi told me cut his teeth at the Mayfair Club. A mild-mannered Asian named Minh Nguyen is part of Men the Master's Vietnamese crew, and is consistently tearing up games in Southern California. Then there's Chris...

It's funny to me watching Chris to my left. He has a dazed expression as if he has no idea what he's doing here. I ask him what his story is and how he came to be playing in the Main Event. Chris tells me he is a Tennessee accountant and he won his seat on Pokerstars.com. He's basically here on a lark, an average working class hero who shot off \$50 online as easily as he might have bought a scratch-off ticket. Chris won a seat into the championship and now here he is, completely oblivious to who he is playing and what's at stake. He tells me his last name is Moneymaker, but I'm pretty sure he's putting me on.

I have my game-plan, and Chris is going to be my next victim. I like the guy and even feel a little sorry for him. He's obviously the weakest player at the table, but he doesn't know it. The rest of these guys are playing cautious and tight. They aren't giving anything away, and it will take a long slow grind for me to end up with their stacks. But Chris is an aggressive player who plays as if he doesn't know what it feels like to lose. I've been scrutinizing him for a few hours now. He sees lots of flops and never misses an opportunity to bet if he thinks there is a chance of taking the pot.

There is something else I pick up on Chris. He has a breathing tell like something out of an old Hollywood movie. Anytime Chris feels a little weak, he starts breathing heavier and his nostrils flare. It's a classic fight-or-flight response. Taking him out will be easy. I'll keep giving him rope to hang himself, watch his breathing for weakness, call his bets, and let him continue bluffing chips off when I have it, or push him off his hands when I don't.

I'm in the cutoff with Chris to my left. I look down and see KQ, which isn't the best hand, but it's good enough. It might as well be Aces compared to some of the drivel I've been raising blinds with all week. I put in a 3x BB raise and

Chris calls on his button. Marcel and Jason both fold. It's shaping up nicely. Headsup with the fish. The flop comes out 9-4-2 and I completely miss, but it doesn't matter because he probably missed too. Then again maybe he flopped a set or started strong...

only one way to know for sure.

I check to Chris and watch his nose as he makes a good sized bet. I don't focus on how much he's betting, only on his nostrils. If they flare, I'll know he doesn't have a set or an overpair. They start flaring the moment before he announces his bet.

As soon as I say I'm all-in, the spectators gasp and ESPN raises the boom mic as their cameras focus on Chris. Everyone prepares for a death scene. I have Chris covered by just over a hundred thousand. He goes deep into the tank, and for a moment I'm a little relieved that I didn't blow this. If he had snap-called, it would have meant my read was dead wrong and Chris had been setting me up the whole time. He'd turn over a set of nines or an overpair and I'd be crippled.

Chris doesn't snap-call and agonizes instead. It doesn't matter what he's holding, I know it's a fold and he knows it too. He is faced with the end if he calls. His tournament will likely be over and he'll go back home to Tennessee with a cool story. He'll still be telling his co-workers 30 years from now about how he made it deep in the WSOP and went head-to-head with legends like Johnny Chan, Phil Hellmuth and Dutch Boyd. I start thinking about the next hand, the next round, the next day. I'm no longer thinking about the present hand, where I just put in the majority of my stack in on a semi-bluff with overcards. Because sometimes you're sure. Like right now. I am absolutely, confidently, 100% positive, 100% sure that Chris Moneymaker is going to fold his trashy hand.

"I call."

Fuck.

CHAPTER ONE

Building a Time Machine

**“Don’t be afraid of any of them, Dutch.
They are all just scared little boys inside.”**

Melissa Hayden

It is easy to feel outclassed when you are sitting at the table with world-class poker players. Phil Hellmuth, Phil Ivey, Doyle Brunson, Johnny Chan, Gus Hansen, and Erik Seidel all seem larger than life when you see them across the felt for the first time. Yet each of them began their life the same way any of us do, and each began their poker life as a donkey.



Underestimating your opponents is dangerous on the felt, but it can be equally dangerous to overestimate them. The first time I played with Phil Ivey, I couldn’t shake the feeling that perhaps he was playing with some supernatural ability to reach into my mind and psychically extract the faces of my holecards. Now I can tell you with close to 100% certainty that psychic abilities do not exist at the poker table.

Today, Phil Ivey is widely considered to be the best all-around poker player in the game. He didn’t start out that way. Nobody does. He started out in Atlantic City using a fake ID to enter the casinos as a teenager. The name on his license read Jerome Graham, and Ivey got the nickname “No Home Jerome”. Many think the nickname stuck because he practically lived at the poker table. It’s less known among poker fans that the name stuck at least in part because he slept underneath a boardwalk in New Jersey. It is only after tens of thousands of hours playing the game, studying the game, thinking and even dreaming about the game that a poker player evolves into something great.

But new players out there shouldn't be discouraged. The law of diminishing returns applies in poker. The more you put in, the less you get back. In six months, any dedicated, reasonably intelligent person can become a good poker player. The difference between a good player and a world-class champion is not as wide as many think. It certainly isn't as wide as the difference between a good player and a bad one.

Think of it this way. Imagine you see a poker game where the worst poker player in the world is playing against the best poker player in the world. You should be willing to sit down in that game because your edge over the worst player far outweighs the edge you are giving up to the best player.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

“The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser men so full of doubts.”

Bertrand Russell

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

The toughest challenge in poker, and perhaps all of life, is to know yourself. It is not an easy task to understand where you are, what you know, and how you measure up. The further along you are as a poker player, the less sure of yourself you become.

I have competed at the highest levels of poker, against the greatest players to have ever graced the felt. I've won and lost small fortunes in a single hand and have been knocked down more times than I can count. This book is the story of how I got to where I am. It's the story of hard-fought battles in the green felt jungle.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

My story started in Missouri, Christmas Eve, 1980. I was the firstborn son of my dad, Phil, and mom, Eva, who were barely out of their teens and into life way over their heads. My dad had just been fired from his police unit for

wrecking his cruiser into a telephone pole while filling out a form and steering with his knees. He'd leave us about a year later right after they had my little brother Bobby.

I was too young to remember the fighting and crying that must have come along with the transformation of our family of four into a family of three, but I can imagine the sheer dread my mother must have felt staring at two baby boys and feeling very alone.

After the divorce, my dad stayed out of the picture. No phone calls. No letters. No weekends split between two different houses trying to feign normalcy. My dad turned my mom into a stereotype, and I grew up mirroring the anger she felt for him. Now I realize that he was just a dumb kid who made the very common mistake of entering into a life-long commitment before fully understanding how long life is. So I don't begrudge my dad for leaving my mom anymore, but I still deeply resent his near complete absence in my life. I did learn a valuable lesson from him, though, which has served me well.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Life Lesson #1

Never drive a car and write at the same time.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

We were in and out of welfare growing up, but my mom was the strong welfare type that libertarian hard-liners like to pretend are every bit as much myth as Bigfoot. She was a hard worker and a natural artist. I learned early that these are two skills that society does not reward.

My mother would slave away at a grocery store bakery, decorating birthday cakes. Then she would work a second job at a fast-food chain or a factory to pay for childcare for her two boys. She would come home tired and beaten, sometimes with burn marks from the bakery stove on her arms. All for minimum wage.

Shit rolls downhill. There was a lot of yelling in our home growing up. My mom was constantly under a tremendous amount of stress, wondering how she was going to make rent or the next utility payment. There were countless breakfasts of birthday cakes that were salvaged before being tossed into the grocery dumpster. Birthday cake lunches. Birthday cake dinners. There were a lot of times when we had to heat the house with the stove. She did the best she could, though, and I love her for that.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

But I don't like cake.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

When Bobby and I were four and five, the Nintendo Entertainment System launched in the US. One of our neighbors in the apartment complex got one for Christmas. Bobby and I loved going over there to play Nintendo, even if that really meant just watching our neighbor play through Metroid. Our neighbor heard that if you beat the game three times in a row, the main character would take off his suit to reveal that, oh-my-god, Samus is a woman. This turned out to be true. It's the first memory I have of my mind being blown.



Our neighbor further heard that if you beat Metroid ten times in a row, she'd get naked and we'd all see 8-bit tits. This turned out to be a lie. I know this

because Bobby and I watched our neighbor beat *Metroid* twenty times in a row and the girl never got naked. He left his NES on for a week while he slept so he wouldn't lose his game. We didn't get to play more than a half hour during that whole time. He said he was worried we'd mess it up, but the real reason was probably because it's boring and frustrating as shit watching someone else play *Metroid* while you are sitting on the couch doing nothing. Video games are a lot like poker in that regard.

Bobby and I came up with a plan to get our own NES. Our mom had recently taken us to the dollar theatre to see *Back to the Future*. We came up with the idea to build a time machine. Then we would travel into the future and ask our future selves for a few hundred bucks so that we could go to Toys "R" Us and buy the system and a few games.

We scavenged our apartment complex dumpsters for any materials that could be used as time machine parts. We filled a shoebox full of rusty screws, broken shards of glass and aluminum cans. Then we got to tinkering.

It didn't work. But to this day, I still think that if some kid ever comes up to me claiming to be my former self from the past, and asks me for a couple hundred bucks so him and my little brother can go buy *Zelda*, I'd take that little kid to Best Buy and send him back to 1985 with an Xbox One and strict orders not to let the asshole next door play.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

The only constant in my life was family. My mother spent every minute she could with Bobby and me, and devoted herself to teaching us about the world. She taught us to read when we were two and three years old. She'd drag us to church every single Sunday. My mother was, and still is, a devout Mormon. Ten percent of her income to tithing and fifty percent of her weekend to church meetings. It's the only leak she's ever had, besides her addiction to Pepsi.

Whenever my mom couldn't make rent, we'd move to a different place. We moved a lot. Two dozen homes before I was ten. Sometimes it would be a small

move across town. Other times it would be a longer one to a different state. I got used to constant change.

The temporary nature of friends. The uncertainty of where you will be in the short term. This outlook would come to serve me well as a professional poker player.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

When I turned eight, my dad and my grandma sent a package as a combined Christmas and birthday present for Bobby and me to share. It was a Nintendo. I loved my dad that day.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Life Lesson #2
You can buy a kid's love with video games.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Shortly after we received our Nintendo, I made my first bet. I had my eye on a new video game called Double Dragon, where two brothers battle a violent street gang with bats and knives to rescue a kidnapped common love interest. It didn't seem weird to us that both brothers would share a common love interest. Double Dragon called to me. I had almost saved up enough Christmas and Birthday money to buy the game. I was only ten bucks short, but I was also eight and unemployed.

One day I came home from school and my mom asked what I'd learned. I told her that in science class I had learned the average temperature of the human body. "And what is it?" she asked.

I responded with a certainty: 97.8 degrees. Fahrenheit.

I have little doubt my school teacher did NOT tell her class that the human body was 97.8 degrees. The actual average core temperature of the human

body is 98.6 degrees, and my mother knew this fact because prior to getting married and having kids, she spent a year in nursing school. She told me as much, but I was confident she was wrong and I was right. The actual average core temperature of the human body is a fact that will forever be carved into my brain because of what my mom said next.

“Uhhh... wanna bet?”

Damn right I wanted to bet. How much? Ten dollars. That’s the amount I needed to start playing Double Dragon, and that’s the amount I was sure I was going to win off my mother. We booked it, then drove to the library and looked it up in the Encyclopedia Britannica.

I was wrong.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

“Never be certain of anything. It’s a sign of weakness.”

Dr. Who

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Losing that bet was about the worst feeling I can remember. I’ve had a lot of experience with losses. Several times at the WSOP I’ve had big pocket pairs cracked near or even at a final table, sending me on the rail to watch the lucky bastard soar to a bracelet win with the resulting chip lead. Once, in a big Tunica PLO cash game, I had a guy catch a four-outer on the river to snatch away a \$40,000 pot. Once, while playing outside with Bobby, he accidentally dropped a brick on my foot and I lost my big toenail in the resulting bloody mess.

All of those negative experiences paled in comparison to the sickening feeling of losing that first \$10 bet. It was the first and only time I’ve ever cried over a gambling loss.

My mom must have felt pretty bad for me. After I had stopped crying, she took us out for pizza. Then she drove me over to the local high school and told me she was going to give me a chance to win my money back. She pointed to a hurdle on the empty track and said if I could jump over that hurdle she'd give me the \$20 I needed for Double Dragon. It seemed impossible. I asked her for three shots at it, and she agreed.

On my first attempt, I ran full-speed and tried to clear the jump. Instead, I hit my shin and crashed onto the track. It should have hurt, but at this point I was numb to pain. I got up, dusted myself off, put the hurdle back upright, and tried again. The second time, I ran even harder. I cleared it.

The extreme feeling of elation after “winning” that \$20 almost equaled the profound sense of loss I felt earlier that day. I was giddy, and so was Bobby. He wanted to play the game just as badly as I did. My mom took us to Kmart and Bobby and I spent the rest of the night and all of that weekend glued to the television as we fought through waves of gang members, beating them with bats and slicing them with knives, working to rescue our common love interest.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

By the time I was 10 years old, after some time in Utah and California, the three of us moved back to Missouri to a small rural town north of Kansas City called Orrick. My mom had met a guy from the area named Albert. The two had gotten engaged and my mom moved our family to Orrick to be closer to him. Then Mom and Albert broke up and we stayed in Orrick because we didn't have a better place to go.

Bobby and I were oblivious to the adult drama going on in my mom's world. We would spend the days playing pickup baseball games in the neighborhood and spend the evenings playing video games. When the school year started, we were given placement tests and we scored highly enough to enter the gifted program.

Orrick was such a small town that each grade in the elementary school only had about twenty-five kids. The gifted program actually just meant that every

day three or four of the kids in each grade spent an hour with the school's principal, Mr. Brown. He was a great educator and the gifted program was like a laboratory where Mr. Brown would have us focus on any special project he thought worthwhile. One week we'd read high-school books, the next week, Mr. Brown would teach us a little programming on old computers, and the following week we would perform a play on Lincoln. I looked forward to that hour every school day because it was always filled with something new.

For one project, as part of a scholarship program for Duke University, Mr. Brown decided to have us all take the ACT. The ACT is a college admittance test similar to the SAT. Mr. Brown worked with us through several ACT prep guides. Picture a handful of 10, 11 and 12 year old kids receiving a crash-course in high-school algebra from a zealous, full-bearded farmer-turned-teacher and you have a good idea of what it was like. When the scores came back, I scored 23 out of a possible 36. It wasn't an amazing score as the average high school graduate nationally scored a 21. I remember four 13 year olds landed a perfect score as part of the same Duke program. But 23 was decent, especially for an 11 year old kid.

The next year, my mom decided to take me out of school and enroll me in a community college located near Kansas City, about an hour away from where we lived. The college had open admissions which meant anybody could enroll as long as they obtained a GED or an 18 or better on the ACT. I had just turned 12 and I didn't feel ready. I expressed my misgivings to my mom telling her I didn't know enough to be a college student. She just smiled and responded matter-of-factly, "That's why you go to college. To learn." I still wasn't convinced. Then my mom told me that being a full-time college student meant spending only 12 hours a week in class, as opposed to 35 hours a week at middle school. I was sold. I started part time at Metropolitan Community College in January 1993, and moved up to full-time in the summer semester.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Orrick was a farming community right next to the Missouri River. The river would end up flooding our town along with the two bedroom house we were renting. Before the flood, Bobby and I spent a weekend with the rest of the

town, filling canvas bags with sand and reinforcing the levee. There was an energetic feeling as the community banded together to save their homes from the slowly rising waters. It felt like a Frank Capra movie, with everybody working hard towards a noble goal and a happy ending.

But nature isn't sentimental. The levee broke.



It was about this time that I was first introduced to poker. After the flood, we didn't have much of a reason to stay in Orrick....not that we had much of a reason before. We moved to a Kansas City suburb called Raymore. Our house was an hour away from my dad's mother, and she arranged for us to spend a weekend with her.

I liked my grandma right away. That Friday night, Grandma Sue pulled out some old board games and taught us to play Stratego. After the game, she pulled out a worn deck of cards and a bag of Tootsie Rolls. Grandma divided the candy like a dealer dividing poker chips. Then she taught Bobby and me how to play Five Card Draw. She dumped off her "chips" and went to bed. Bobby and I played through the night.



I don't remember who won in our first games of poker. I just remember that Tootsie Rolls won taste better.

CHAPTER TWO

The Education of a Poker Player

**“Everybody wants to be famous
but nobody wants to play the game.”**

Lady Gaga

Poker celebrity is a misnomer. Even with as big as poker has gotten, you still don't hear stories of paparazzi camping outside a player's home or following a poker player's family on vacation. You won't ever see a poker pro selling the photography rights to their wedding for millions.

Christina Aguilera reportedly sold her son's first baby pictures for \$2 million to *People* magazine. Around the same time, there was a K-77 soviet submarine being sold on eBay for \$1 million. When you can sell a picture of yourself holding a crying baby for enough money to afford two nuclear-capable submarines... *that's* celebrity.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

In 1996, I was a 15-year-old kid finishing up my Bachelor's Degree at Central Missouri State University and getting ready to start law school in the fall. I had taken the LSAT the year before and scored a 165. It wasn't an Ivy League score, but it was well above average and good enough to get into MU Law. I was going to be a lawyer.

Around the same time, a guy named Brian Koppelman started playing poker in the underground clubs in New York City. Brian had also taken the LSAT, gotten accepted into a law school, and like me probably had a straightforward vision about his life and what he would do with his degree. Brian probably thought he was going to be a lawyer too.

Instead, Koppelman was grinding away in illegal NYC cardrooms. He was calling it “research” for a movie screenplay he was writing with a childhood friend named David Levien. *Rounders* would end up derailing more than a few legal careers.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Rewind a bit. In 1994, I was a 13-year-old kid finishing up my Associates of Arts degree at Metropolitan Community College and getting ready to start at CMSU in the fall. Bobby had also started taking college courses and we both planned to study computer science. We were going to program video games.

When the semester started, I got my first student loan. After paying for classes and books, I had a thousand dollars left over. I bought a Sega Genesis and an IBM 486sx personal computer.

I realize now that Bobby and I had actually found a way to travel through time and ask our future selves for money to buy video games. I’m still paying for those loans.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

It didn’t take long before Bobby and I became more fascinated with the PC than with our video game consoles. We opened up the case of our IBM, popped in a 14.4k modem, played with a few switches on the card and the motherboard, and finally got that baby whistling.

The Internet was created in the 60s, but in 1994 the Internet as we know it did not exist. Bobby and I could get onto the Internet at the college computer lab, but instead of Google and Firefox, we had Archie and Gopher. For two teenage boys looking to get into trouble, the Internet was pretty tame.

The real fun at the time was in bulletin board systems, also known as BBSes. These walls of text were the true precursors to the Internet we know today, and how AOL and some of the bigger Internet Service Providers began their

businesses. Real-time chat, forums, software downloads, multi-player games... hidden together behind a telephone number.

Bobby and I would stay up late into the night dialing local numbers on our modem, playing Legend of the Red Dragon and then browsing the uploads. Eventually we stumbled upon a few hacking and phreaking zines and found the numbers to some underground boards. The good numbers weren't local, but there were plenty of ways to get free long distance.

We weren't content with just being users. We downloaded a few different BBS software packages, with cool names like Renegade and Wildcat, and started our own underground BBS in Kansas City's 816 area code.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Bobby and I have a lot in common, including our initials "RAB". We named our underground BBS "RABIES". We hosted anything we could get our hands on. Hacking zines. Phreaking files. Wardialers. Warez. It was our own digital playground. We would run it between 10pm when my mom went to bed and 6am when she'd wake up.

We used to have frequent flame wars on RABIES. One day we pissed off the wrong guy. I don't remember how. I just remember our mom getting a call from an angry user telling her that her two boys were operating an illegal pirate bulletin board system while she was sleeping.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

In *Waiting for Superman*, a documentary about the educational system in America, the movie cites a study that found American students ranked 29th in the world in math, but 1st in confidence about their math abilities.

I can identify with the kids in the study. As children, our mom always made Bobby and me feel like we were special and could accomplish anything. She encouraged every interest, and we both felt destined for greatness.

The night Mom got the call about our underground BBS was the first time I can remember her being less than encouraging about one of our ideas. She grounded us from the computer for a month. It was the end of our SysOp days.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

The RABIES project could have ended much worse. Instead, it just ended and life went on. School kept trudging along and eventually I came to the end of my third year of college and had to decide what I was going to do after graduation. That's when I took the Law School Admission Test.

When I got the results, I looked at the remaining coursework for my BS degree in Computer Science and saw I wouldn't have it finished by the time the Fall semester started at MU Law. But if I changed my major to a BA in Sociology, I could finish on time and start on my graduate degree in the Fall of '96 instead of the Fall of '97. So I switched.

Compared to a BS, a liberal arts degree is pretty breezy. I practically floated through the last couple of undergrad semesters. I think Sociology is interesting and I can make a convincing argument that it is an incredibly useful field of study, every bit as worthy a scientific discipline as mathematics or physics. But I don't buy that argument. The truth is Sociology is a soft science and all those Sociology classes have been close to useless since my last test.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Life Lesson #3

Don't finish college with a worthless degree.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

So in the Fall of 1996, my family moved to Columbia MO and I started my first year of law school. I was fifteen and six years younger than the next 1L, but there were a couple of law students in my year who looked even younger than I did. I wasn't immediately outed.

The first day, I found myself walking to Hulston Hall from the family housing apartments with another entering law student named Aaron Martinez. He was a friendly, responsible, hard-working father who was as excited as I was to be starting a legal career. We became friends and sat next to each other in the front row of our classes.

At MU Law, the professors had assigned seating, and where you sat the first day is where you sat for the rest of the semester. A week into the school year, I showed up to classes wearing a new green and white striped shirt I had bought from Walmart. When I got to my assigned seat, I realized Aaron was wearing the exact same shirt.

For five awkward hours we went from class to class sitting smack in the middle of the front row. Our professors took their turns coming in, giving us a double take, and making a wisecrack about our matching shirts before starting to laugh. Each time the scene got funnier to our classmates, who had witnessed it as many times as we had lived it.

At the end of the day, our property instructor repeated the same joke our torts instructor made an hour earlier. The whole class burst into laughter for a good two minutes.

Looking back, there was no reason I should have felt embarrassed. The situation was funny, and I laughed along with everyone else at the time. But it *was* embarrassing and as a result of “the day of two shirts”, I understand why women become absolutely mortified if they show up to a party and another guest is wearing the same dress.

It’s been almost 20 years and I only vaguely remember the elements of adverse possession or the holding of *International Shoe v. Washington*. I do, however, remember the feeling of the whole class laughing at my shirt like it was yesterday.

In 1988, a scientific study was published about seat position and its effect on grades. The study found a strong correlation between class performance and where a student sits. Students at the front scored an average of 80% on tests, students in the middle rows scored 71.6%, and students in the back rows scored 68.1%. Further, the study found the same correlation when seating was assigned by the professor, which means seating effect on grades can't be dismissed by the perfectly reasonable explanation that good students are more likely to sit towards the front. It's a causal relationship and not just a correlation.

It may seem obvious that someone who sits in the front of the class would pay more attention, be more engaged, and perform better on test day. Besides being obvious, it's demonstrably true.

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Life Lesson #4
Sit in the front of the class.

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My best friend in law school was an overly zealous Christian named Matt Winfrey. Matt was a 15-year-old trapped in a 22-year-old's body who loved video games and sci-fi novels just as much as I did. He was a black belt in Judo with a secret desire to be a real-life Batman.

Matt designed gear and an outfit, studied maps of St. Louis, and spent some time researching vigilantism laws. He eventually gave up the superhero plan because there wasn't enough crime. He was convinced that someday, when the anti-Christ came, there *would* be enough crime.

Matt's favorite beverage was water. He always sat in the back of the class.

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Matt and I installed Doom on two PCs in the law library computer lab. Instead of studying case law, we'd frag each other for hours between classes, after classes and on weekends.

On Fridays, we'd have lunch with Randy Canis and Rob Stientjes at the St. Louis Bread Company. Randy and Rob were my other two best friends in law school, and would later become my roommates. Those friendships were different from the one I had with Matt. Rob and Randy were more like older brothers, treating me much the same way I'd later treat my 20 year younger half-brother Austin. Matt, on the other hand, treated me as an equal for the first time since I'd started college.

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During the tail-end of my first year in law school, my mom met a newly divorced pharmacist named Richard Seibert in the church Christmas choir. He was 6'6", very strong, and had a wealth of knowledge about World War II, astronomy, bow hunting, and other things which are largely useless in today's society unless you find yourself on the receiving end of a nuclear strike or the asking end of a Jeopardy answer.

For the first time in years, my mom felt attractive and wanted. She fell instantly in love, and disregarded her Mormon bishop's advice to stay away from Richard because of his history of infidelity and abuse. She had prayed about it, after all, and got the warm feeling of the holy spirit telling her this was the one.

Richard already had seven kids, so from a biological point of view he was a big winner.

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My mom and Richard married with a quickness. It was a pretty May wedding outside on a vineyard by the Missouri river. I liked Richard and took him at his word when he said he would take care of my mother. The thought of my mom being mostly alone after Bobby and I had grown up and started our own lives had always felt like a sick weight.

As soon as they were married, my mom and stepfather moved to Kansas City where he had been offered a pharmacy job at a hospital. My mom opened up a Mormon bookstore. It felt like the beginning of a happy ending for her.

Bobby and I were 16 and 15, and still living in the student housing a few blocks from the University. Our tight family dynamic of three had very suddenly dissolved and now Bobby and I were on our own.

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A lot of things started to happen fairly quickly when Mom left the house and we were officially on our own. Here is the list of the most important things.

(1) The laundry piled up. My mom wasn't joking when she complained that our clothes didn't wash themselves.

(2) We became experts at preparing ramen noodles, hot pockets, and mac & cheese.

(3) Bobby took a page from the Gates/Zuckerberg playbook and stopped going to college. Instead of learning to code, he stayed home and practiced coding. He also retreated deeper into the #hacker scene and started hanging out with the likes of Napster and Jennicide.

(4) My best friend Matt told me I didn't qualify as a Christian (because I was Mormon) and I would unfortunately be burning in eternal hellfire when I died. After much soul-searching, I became an atheist.

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Life Lesson #5

The most effective propaganda is the truth.

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That summer and the second year of law school flew by. Bobby had retreated into his virtual self. He was dating an 18 year old girl named Heather he had met online and had convinced to move to Columbia.

Bobby developed a reputation under several different monikers within the #hacking subculture. His new girlfriend Heather was a hacker groupie, and in a community mostly filled with script-kiddies who couldn't code their way out of a wet paper bag, Bobby was a rising star. I noticed that Heather called him "Rob".

Bobby and I had drifted apart. He'd disappear at night, sometimes stealing my car even though he only had a permit. I had no idea where he went. It stopped feeling like we were a team. He grew a mohawk, dyed his hair, and started to look like a character out of a William Gibson novel. He started hanging out with MU undergrads who would get him drunk and also call him "Rob". He even bought a skateboard.

During the summer of '97, I got a call from an FBI agent trying to get in touch with "Rob". I went into his room, but my little brother wasn't around. Holding the cordless phone, I looked around his room and saw three dozen brick-style cellars, stacks of dot-matrix printouts with rows of confidential info, and an actual lineman's headset. I told the agent my brother was fifteen and was probably out skateboarding. He left a number and I told him I'd have "Rob" get back to him.

As I hung up, I started to get angry at my little brother. But it wasn't anger, exactly.

I had spent the whole summer recovering from my lost religion by sitting on the couch in a depressed stupor, listening to Radiohead, teaching myself guitar, and watching every "R" rated movie I could get my hands on (which up until then I thought were sinful to watch). Bobby spent the whole summer getting into the types of questionable adventures we'd seen in movies like *Sneakers* and *Hackers*.

Bobby was reckless, unpredictable and spontaneous and I wasn't his partner in crime anymore. I was his careful older brother. I had stopped taking chances. It wasn't anger I felt at all. It was jealousy.

When Bobby came home that night, I had a very short talk with him. The next morning, all the shit in his bedroom had disappeared.

By the end of 1997, Bobby had been scouted by a San Jose headhunter, who was lurking on IRC like a child predator. At only 15, Bobby was flown out to Silicon Valley by a networking startup called Frontier Global Center. They hired Bobby after running him through the standard coding interview gauntlet ("How many window cleaners live in New York City?"), but had to wait for a few months for him to turn 16 so he was legally allowed to work.

I started to miss Bobby even before he left. Then he was gone. For the first time in my life, I felt alone.

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My stepfather Richard owned a four-bedroom house in Columbia, and he offered to let me move in with some of my law school buddies. Rent would be cheap. I asked Matt if he wanted one of the rooms, but he said he liked his apartment too much. Then I turned to Rob and Randy.

Rob had just gotten a divorce and Randy had just gotten engaged. Both were living off campus and paying too much for their spaces so, I offered them each a room and they jumped at the chance to move closer to school for a really low price.

On the surface, Rob and Randy seemed like opposites and I got the impression they didn't really like each other. But the more I got to know them, the more I realized how similar they actually were. Randy was Jewish and Rob was Catholic, though neither was too serious about religion. They treated their religions like a cultural experience rather than their most defining characteristic. They both enjoyed giving Matt a hard time for being such a prude.

Randy and Rob were super diligent our first year, briefed every case and spent more time outlining than I spent fragging. Each had come from an engineering background, had struggled in undergrad, and were struggling through law school. They both finished slightly below average after our 1L year.

But during our second year, something clicked for both of them. They each found a class that they ranked. For Randy it was Intellectual Property and for Rob it was Tax. From then on, every elective they chose focused on those subjects and they both kicked ass.

I once asked Rob why he found tax law so interesting. He explained there was nothing really interesting about it, he was just really good at it. Maybe the best at it. He had taken and ranked every single tax course he could and ended up close to the top of our class, even with the disappointing first year grades.

The one thing I remember Rob telling me about tax law was despite all the bitching and whining you hear about loopholes and write-offs, the tax system was basically fair.

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Life Lesson #6

Don't pursue what you love.

Pursue what you are great at, and love being great.

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It often happens in life that a small occurrence can turn out to be life changing. At the tail end of my 3L Fall semester, Matt and I spent a Saturday at the local dollar show and burned through a couple of movies. One of them was *Rounders*.

Here is the movie in a nutshell:

(SPOILER ALERT)

Rounders is about a law student named Mike McDermott (Matt Damon) who loses a substantial amount of money and his tuition fees in a high stakes poker game against a Russian Mobster named Teddy KGB (John Malkovich). After his loss, Mike promises his girlfriend he's going to give up poker and is forced to work nights driving a delivery truck in order to pay his tuition.

During Mike's second year of law school, one of his closest friends named Worm (Ed Norton) is paroled from prison where he was serving time for running a credit card scam. Worm owes money to Teddy KGB, but Teddy doesn't care about the money, only killing Worm. Worm asks Mike for help so they embark on a multi-day poker marathon in order to win money to settle Worm's debt. Mike's girlfriend proceeds to dump him, to which he responds by playing more poker, beating KGB in another high stakes game and paying off the debt. Mike then decides to drop out of law school and move to Vegas to play cards for a living. End of movie.

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Every little nuance of *Rounders*, every reference to famous players like Doyle Brunson, Johnny Chan, Amarillo Slim and Erik Seidel... they were all lost on me, but for some reason I was enthralled. I hadn't played a hand of poker since my Grandma Sue had taught Bobby and me six years ago. I'd never even heard of No-Limit Texas Hold'em, which I just found out was the "Cadillac of Poker".

While Matt thought it was a decent movie, he didn't seem as excited as I was to go pick up a deck of cards. But we *did* pick up the deck, then we separated some change and started playing Texas Hold'em for the first time. I remember winning solidly.

The idea of dropping out of law school to save a friend from trouble by taking big reckless risks really connected with me. I was a few months away from graduating, and had absolutely no plan of what I was going to do when I entered the real world. Up until *Rounders*, I didn't know poker was even an option.

CHAPTER THREE

Old Regular and the Wagon Wheel Gang

“The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.”

Albert Camus

If I were to pick the most significant moment in the history of poker, it would be the moment on January 1, 1998, when Randy and Beverly Blumer’s site PlanetPoker.com dealt the very first online poker hand for real money. The hand was dealt on a \$3/6 Limit Hold’em table. By February, the site had enough players to sustain a single cash game for more than 24 hours.



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By the end of 1998, after I had watched *Rounders* and caught the poker bug, I became a part-time law student and a full-time poker student. I jumped online and did a Yahoo search for the keyword “poker”. I soaked up everything out there, which didn’t take long because there was very little information online

about the game. I discovered an obscure subculture which had slipped by unnoticed for the last twenty years. They had a newsgroup (rec.gambling.poker), an IRC channel (#poker), and a few magazines (Card Player, Poker Digest).

I headed to my local city library to check out every book on poker. Pickings were slim. These were the books I checked out:

Thursday Night Poker, by Peter Steiner

The Education of a Poker Player, by Herbert Yardley

Play Poker, Quit Work and Sleep Till Noon, by John Fox

How to Play Winning Poker, by Avery Cardoza

Hold'em Poker, by David Sklansky

I burned through all five books over the weekend. It was hard to decode what was worthwhile and what wasn't. The Yardley book was more an interesting spy novel than a how-to. The Sklansky title was more of a pamphlet than a book, but it had a decent section on which starting hands to play. The Fox and Cardoza books were worthless.

Out of the five, the one that really made an impression was the Steiner book. It still holds up as a decent introduction to the game.

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Back then, the vast majority of online poker players were free-money players. This is just as true today. All one has to do is look at the tens of millions of players on Zynga poker to see that real-money play pales in comparison.

Playing on a website for free-money is mostly a pointless exercise, and can even be detrimental to your development as a poker player. Opponents with nothing to lose play much differently than they do in a real poker game. You don't want to develop a style of play that wins when every opponent is seeing every showdown, but loses when opponents actually care about preserving their chips. Unless you are completely new to the game and simply trying to learn the mechanics of how betting works and what hands beat what at showdown,

you are better off staying away from free-money poker where there is nothing tangible at stake.

That's not to say you should start off by depositing a good chunk of money into an online site or buying into a cash game at your local casino. If you don't have experience playing poker and start by playing for real-money, whether online or live, you will almost certainly lose. You do not want to start your poker pursuit by being comfortable losing.

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Life Lesson #7
Never be comfortable losing.

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There are better alternatives than playing for free with nothing at stake. Free to play poker sites that offer tangible prizes are just a Google search away. Virtually every real-money online cardroom also has a play-money side and regularly offers freerolls for real money prizes. Annette Obrestad, currently the youngest player to ever win a WSOP bracelet, started her poker career by winning a PokerStars freeroll.

Even in 1998, there were places to play online for free where you could win real money. It didn't take long for me to discover a website called 2am.com. They offered free-to-play dealer's choice poker games where you started with a thousand chips. If you went broke, you could get more chips by clicking on ad banners. If you were able to grind up 1,000,000 chips, they would send you a check for \$100.

I started playing on the 2am free site around Thanksgiving in 1998. It took ten weeks for me to run up my chips to the million dollar mark. A week later, a check arrived in my mailbox. By that point, I had spent a good amount of time on rgp and had a better idea of which poker books had passed peer review. I spent the entire hundred on poker books and started the 2am process again.

It took a month to run the 2am starting stack to a million the second time. The third time took two weeks. By the fourth run, I had it down to a science. It took less than a week from then on out.



The two main lessons I learned from the 2am site really only apply to home games. It's pretty rare to be in a casino where the game is dealer's choice, and even when it is, you usually play a full round to ensure that the player calling the game doesn't get a positional advantage. In most home games, though, where you play dealer's choice you only play a single hand of the called game. This is also how it worked on 2am.

The first lesson is this: **always call a game that gives you, as the dealer, a positional advantage.**

Certain games reward acting late more than other games do. Hold'em, for example, rewards the dealer position. As the dealer, you will act last pre flop and on every future round. In Hold'em, this is a big advantage. Seven Card Stud does not reward the dealer position. The first person to act is the one with the highest card showing, so the last person to act will often change after every card is dealt.

When you start talking about bastard games, many of them offer an incredible positional advantage. Consider a Seven Card Stud variant called "Follow the Queen". In this game, anytime a queen is dealt face-up to a player, the next card dealt up is wild (and often queens themselves are also counted as wildcards). If you are playing Follow the Queen as the dealer and are heads up with an opponent, then you have a serious advantage. Anytime he hits a queen, you'll be dealt a wildcard and you'll know exactly what it is. If you get a queen, he won't know what his wildcard is going to be until after the betting round is over. Most importantly, if you are dealt a queen on 6th street, he doesn't get a wildcard, but if he is dealt a queen on 6th street, you do.

The second lesson is this: **a wildcard game is a hustler's game.**

It is hard enough to understand the relative strength of a hand in any given game without wildcards. Once you start adding wildcards into the mix, the values of the average winning hand improve dramatically. If you are playing standard Seven Card Stud, a straight is a good hand and will usually take down the money. But if you are playing with 3s, 6s and 9s wild, a straight ain't shit.

The best thing about a wildcard game is that it changes the highest possible hand. Most players reasonably think the highest possible hand you can have in poker is a royal flush. When you add a wildcard, the highest possible hand you can have is five-of-a-kind. A lot of players unfamiliar with wildcard games don't realize that five-of-a-kind beats a royal flush. In a game with multiple wildcards, a royal flush can be practically worthless.



My favorite hustler game on 2am was called "Lamebrain Pete". It's a variant of Cincinnati, where each player gets five holecards, then after a betting round five community cards are dealt out one-by-one in the middle of the table, with a betting round after each card. The rank of the lowest card on the board is wild.

I won a lot of free chips in Lamebrain Pete from players who would see a board texture like $3\clubsuit A\spadesuit J\diamondsuit T\spadesuit 3\heartsuit$ and think that their royal flush was unbeatable.



By the Spring of '99, I had won the 2am prize ten times before the site changed their rules so that players were only allowed to win a single prize per year. It was time to move to real money. I deposited a few hundred I had won from 2am onto PlanetPoker.com and started grinding \$2/4 and \$3/6 Limit Hold'em.

I started to dream poker.



My last semester at law school rushed by. I still had no idea what I was going to do after graduation. I wasn't quite finished with school yet, because I still had six credit hours and one Sociology course that I needed to finish at CMSU in the fall to get my BA. I wouldn't technically have my law degree until the end of the year. The Dean of the law school let me walk through graduation with my class anyway. I'd miss Hulston Hall and Ol' Mizzou.

The rest of my class studied for the bar, but my summer was wide open. I called Bobby and asked if I could spend the summer with him in Mountain View, CA. He said I could, so I drove to the west coast. I got to Bobby's apartment after two days of driving. His place reminded me of a scene in *Boiler Room*. He'd been in California for almost a year making decent money, yet apart from a television, a Playstation 2, a stereo, and a mattress on his bedroom floor, his apartment was completely empty.

"How much are you paying for this place, Bobby?"

"Too much, man... \$1,600 a month."

There was no couch, no table, not a single picture on a single wall. There were a dozen different delivery menus taped to the fridge, which I opened and was empty except for some condiment packages, a Chinese dinner in a paper box, and a half-gallon of milk in a gallon jug with an expiration date from 1982.

We ordered a pizza and sat around all night catching up. Bobby showed me an old SNL video which was making the rounds with the dot-com engineers in the valley called "First CityWide Change Bank". He said it pretty much summed up what was going on out there. He told me about the dot-com boom, and how everyone was running around with business plans that didn't actually have any long-term way of making a profit. It didn't seem to matter. The goal was just to get funded, get big, IPO, and get out.

Bobby showed me a program called Napster, which was coded by a kid named Shawn Fanning that he knew from the #hacking days. Shawn went by "napster" on IRC, hence the name of what would eventually disrupt the entire music industry.

Bobby asked what I'd been up to for the last year. I showed him poker.

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The next day, Bobby had to go to work, so I was left alone in his house. I loaded up the PS2 and played for a few hours. Browsed the Internet for a few more hours. I looked around the apartment and it felt like a jail cell.

I wasn't going to be able to just sit there all summer, so I decided to get a job. The Macy's at Valley Fair was hiring. I thought it might be a good way to meet people and get me out of the house, so I called the number and was scheduled for an interview.

I remembered that poker was legal in some parts of California. I looked online to see if there were any nearby poker rooms. Sure enough there was one right down the street called the Wagon Wheel, and two more in San Jose called Bay 101 and Garden City.

California was a 21 and over state, but I'd been passing as older since my first day of college. It couldn't hurt to try.

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The interview at Macy's turned out to be a group one, where a dozen people were herded into a room to face the department managers. One of them would ask a question, and we'd take turns answering. I wore a tie, shaved, and gave what I thought were strong replies. I gave one answer that I thought scored me the job.

"Suppose you are working right now and there were no customers on the floor. What would you do?"

A kid with a suit on: "I'd clean up the floor."

A twenty-something with jeans and a t-shirt: "Clean up the floor."

Me, after a quick glance around the room: “I’d pick up those three pieces of trash over there, line up those five empty chairs over there, and set that wall clock to the right time.”

A girl in a dress: “Ummm... I’d clean up the floor.”

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I got the job. I was hoping for a spot in the Women’s department so I could meet California girls, but instead I got Men’s Basics. I’d be selling t-shirts, dress shirts, belts, sunglasses, wallets, socks and underwear. The first two days were spent sitting in front of a television for seven hours watching orientation videos, then two hours punching buttons on a fake cash register. Then I started working the floor.

There was a lot of downtime. The worst part was cleaning up the dressing rooms. It still surprises me that people actually rip open a pair of underwear and try them on before they buy. I guess when you’re spending \$40 on a pair of boxers, you gotta make sure they look good.

Men’s Basics wasn’t the worst department to work in. The worst was Men’s Suits. One of the long-time workers from that department told me that at least once a year, a guy would bring a suit coat into a fitting room and jerk himself all over the lining.

Some poor sucker would end up having to clean up the floor.

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Almost everyone in that group interview also got the job. It wasn’t my stellar answer at all. Just slacks and a pulse. The only guy I didn’t see around Macy’s was the one who showed up in a t-shirt and jeans. I like to think he got a job as a software developer at Pets.com.

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I eventually mustered up the courage to walk into the Wagon Wheel, even though I was underage. It was a quaint little bar with a big wooden wheel outside the front door. Inside were four poker tables, two of them empty and two of them full of old guys playing \$3/6 Limit Hold'em.

There was a seat open, and I asked the floorman (who also was a dealer, brush, cashier and bartender) if I could sit in. He pulled up the chair and seemed happy to have a new face in the game. I felt butterflies in my stomach as I posted behind the button and played my first hand of real-money poker in a cardroom.

The first thing I noticed was that everything was happening so quickly. Online, you play 2-3x more hands per hour at any given table than you do in a live game. But live poker didn't feel slow at all. It felt frantically fast. The action was to me before I even realized that the players to my right had folded. I had picked up enough tips from Sklansky to know it didn't matter what I had here.

"I bet," I declared nervously as I tossed in another \$3 in chips.

The big blind, an old regular, snorted at me. I think he knew it was my first time.

"You can't bet, kid. You're going to have to raise."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but a few of the other players seemed to think it was funny. I figured it must have been an inside joke. The button and the big blind called.

The flop came out and I hit two pair. Old Regular checked.

I threw out \$3 in chips, trying not to look too confident. "I raise."

Old Regular snorted even louder.

"You can't raise yourself, kid!"

A few more chuckles from the same players. I started to understand that they were laughing at me. The button folded, and it was up to Old Regular.

“This is your first time in here, right? What’s your name, kid? Where you from?”

I didn’t know back then that you should avoid talking while you are involved in a poker hand, especially to a player who is also in the hand and considering his move. So I lowered my voice a bit and gave him a reply.

“My name’s Russ. I just moved here from Missouri.”

He thought for a while. I thought he was thinking about a call, which I wanted even though I was growing more fearful by the second that he had flopped a set. Now I know he was only contemplating what he’d say next.

“Ok, kid. You win this one. You’ve earned yourself a poker nickname.” He feigned thought. “I’m going to start calling you ‘Right Off the Bus Russ’.”

The whole room erupted in laughter and he finally threw his cards in the muck. My hands were shaking as I took down my first real-money pot. It was an amazing rush, much better than winning online.

Old Regular got in one last punchline. “Come on, Russ. Act like you’ve done this before. Did you even check his ID, Frank?”

The whole room continued laughing, with nobody laughing louder than the floor. They had seen right through me, but I didn’t care. I was filled with so much exhilaration that there wasn’t room left for embarrassment.

There would be plenty of time for embarrassment later.



Of course I lost that night but earned my first poker nickname. And they never did card me.



A few days later, I was back on the Macy's shift. The job paid minimum wage with a draw against commission, which is the sales equivalent of make-up. Most of the longer working employees were so ineffective as salesman, and had accumulated so much draw against their future commission checks, that they knew they were effectively working for minimum wage. They'd hang out in the inventory room smoking weed.

I still had hopes of making tons of money selling t-shirts that summer. I even visited the local public library and checked out every sales book. During the downtime when there were no customers, I'd look busy folding the dress-shirts, then unfolding them, and re-folding. I got very good at folding... this would serve me well in my poker career.

The highest paid salesman in our department was named Ron. I watched how he worked because he was obviously doing something right. He didn't actually help anybody with purchasing decisions, as the library books suggested. He never tried to upsell them, identify a need, or match them with the perfect socks.

Instead, Ron's primary method was to constantly scan the floor for customers holding a bunch of shit in their arms. He would race quickly towards the target, slowing down only if they noticed him approaching. With hands behind his back, Ron would linger right next to them. It was uncomfortable to watch, and must have been doubly uncomfortable for anyone shopping in the "Ron Zone". The customer would inevitably stop browsing, and ask to be checked out. Ron would say very little and motion to the nearest cash register. He'd quickly ring them up, and they would just as quickly leave.

Ron's secondary sales method was to steal commissions. He was always on the lookout for a coworker leading a customer to an occupied register. They'd be waiting right next to "their" customer and Ron would swoop right in, gesturing towards a free register. "If you don't want to wait, I can get you finished right over here, sir."

Sometimes he would sneak around to all the registers, logout his coworkers and login using his own employee ID number. Our coworkers would return to “their” register and ring up a customer without checking to see who was being credited the commission.

The other workers hated Ron. Having had my own commissions poached, part of me shared the sentiment. Another part of me, though, was more curious about what was driving him. I didn’t care about the job or commissions. I took the job to meet girls and to make friends.

Ron didn’t care about making friends. He didn’t talk to the co-workers, he barely talked to the customers, and he was the first one out the door when the store closed. He was there for one reason: to make money.

I saw Ron at the food court one day nursing a soda during our lunch break and decided to join him. I wanted to pick his brain. I made some awkward small talk then asked what he had done before working at Macy’s.

“I was a lawyer.”

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Eventually, I came to understand why Old Regular and the other players at the Wagon Wheel had been chiding me when I announced “bet” and “raise”. I was using the terms incorrectly, which is a common mistake for players new to cash games. Even experienced online players are not used to vocalizing their actions.

Here is the rule to follow so you can avoid looking like a newb at the table. If you have the option of checking (i.e. there are no bets for you to call) and you want to add chips to the pot, it is called a “bet”. On the other hand, if you cannot check and must first call some chips (i.e you want to add even more chips to the pot then what you have to call), then the correct term is a “raise”.

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Life Lesson #8
You can't raise yourself.

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Ron wasn't really a bad guy when I got him talking outside of work. As we sat there in the center of the food court, I asked him why he decided to become a Macy's sales associate if he had a law degree.

Ron said he made more money at Macy's than he was making as a lawyer. He saw the Macy's floor differently than other workers. He viewed the customers as limited resources that the coworkers were competing for. If he didn't make enough sales in an hour to cover the minimum wage, he saw it as losing money. Ron had a family to support. He had more friendships outside of work than he could effectively foster with his free time.

He asked me what I was interested in outside of work, and I told him I'd been playing some poker around town. He said that he'd given professional poker a shot in Southern California back in the 80s, but that it was impossible to make a living. I wanted to know more. He looked off into nothing. "You'll see."

He checked his watch then abruptly ended our conversation. Our lunch break was almost over. Ron stood up and walked back to the Men's Basics department as I finished my slice of Sbarro's pizza and gazed at all the beautiful California girls.

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An interesting thing to notice the next time you are dragged to a department store is that the majority of items will inevitably be on sale. It used to be that everything was always on sale, but at some point a consumer protection advocate argued to lawmakers that if a t-shirt is always 25% off, then it is actually never 25% off.

So a law was created which required department stores to take out a small percentage of their sales signs, and then move the remaining ones around every so often so consumers wouldn't be confused.

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Life Lesson #9
Almost everything is always on sale.

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Sometime that summer, Bobby and I got an email from my dad Phil. He was in San Francisco and wanted to drive down to meet us in San Jose.

We hadn't seen him for seven years, since he had flown us to Chicago for a week when we were eleven and ten. Before that, we hadn't seen him at all.

We planned for lunch at a Chili's. Bobby and I got there a bit early and took a seat at a booth. We waited for him. He was a few minutes late. My dad took a seat across from us. We said our hellos. Then there was an awkward silence, which he finally broke.

"So how have you boys been?"

We've been ok.

"Anything you want to ask me?"

I asked him why, after being an absent father for the last 16 years, did he reach out to us now that we didn't need him anymore? It was a snarky question. He sat there thinking about how to respond.

"I want to borrow \$50,000 from each of you to start up a business. It's an incredible opportunity."

Bobby and I just sat there. Speechless.

My dad looked kind of annoyed and we realized he was joking.

It was something Bobby or I might have said if we were in his shoes and our grown and abandoned sons were in ours. This is where we inherited humor as a defense mechanism. Often inappropriate and easily misunderstood.

I don't think I laughed at the time, but I still chuckle when I think about that line. It still ranks as one of the more inappropriate jokes I've ever heard. But it was also one of the funnier ones.



The Wagon Wheel became my second home as I spent more time learning the game and the players.

They had a promotion to get their tables going every day. They would give the first eight people in the game \$100 in chips for \$60. The players would have to sit for two hours before they could cashout. It was a good deal, so I started waking up every day at 9am to be one of the first seated.

The Wagon Wheel was open from 10am to midnight. Anytime you have a poker cash game with a forced end, the pots become huge during the last half-hour. The losing players only have a few more hands to get even for the day. Every pot was capped preflop, and at least four players would see the showdown. The final pots of the night would swell over \$300.

At the end of the night, after they would close down the game, the floorman and dealers would pour the chips from the rake collection boxes onto the table so they could rack up the chips. You would never see something like this in a Vegas cardroom, where chips are collected discreetly by security guards wheeling metal carts, replacing full rake boxes and taking the chips to a hidden counting room. Most poker room managers realize it's better for the rake to be a hidden cost, and the less exposed it is to players, the better.

The Wagon Wheel's management was laid back and didn't seem to care if the players caught a glimpse of the day's take. Even when the club had only one

game running, there would still be more than a grand on the table from the day's rake... while every player still sitting at midnight would be stuck for the day.

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Life Lesson #10
The rake always wins.

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When I wasn't hanging out with Bobby, working at Macy's, or playing at the Wagon Wheel, I'd be playing online at PlanetPoker. I was really keen on playing tournaments, but Planet didn't have them.

I found a tournament schedule for Garden City and decided to take a few shots at their daily events. The first time I walked into Garden City, it seemed like a poker paradise. There were at least twenty tables going, two or three dedicated cashiers at the cage, a chip runner, and a floorman who didn't double as a dealer. They spread other games besides Hold'em, like Omaha/8 and Stud/8. They even had a Lowball game. The limits went from \$2/4 all the way up to \$20/40. There was even a high limit \$10-200 Spread Limit game tucked away in the corner. The place made Planet look small-time and the Wagon Wheel like a hole-in-the-wall.

The tournament director at Garden City was Jesse Rogers. He was always smiling, and had a passing resemblance to my old principal, Mr. Brown. The first tournament I entered at Garden City, I made a minimum cash. The second, I won. It's still one of the highlights of my poker career.

The nightly tournament paid out over a grand, so Jesse had to fill out a tax form. He asked to see my driver's license and I nervously turned it over.

Jesse took the license and started writing up the W-2G. Then he looked at the date of birth on my ID. Jesse froze for a few seconds, looked up at me and pursed his lips. He looked slowly over at the security guy by the entrance and

paused for twenty seconds. Then Jesse let out a sigh and filled out the rest of the form. He handed over a small envelope with \$1500 in cash along with a desk clock trophy engraved with “Garden City Casino, Poker Tournament, 1st Place”.

He shook my hand and said, “Congratulations, Russ. Hope to see you win a lot more of these.”

I don’t know if Jesse did the right thing not turning me over to security, confiscating my win, and sending me home packing. At the time, I loved him for letting me slide. He’s still my all-time favorite tournament director.

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I was scheduled to work the next day at Macy’s. Fresh off my tournament win, I decided I was tired of the job. I never went back. Not even to pick up my last paycheck.

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One of the more significant bad beats of my life was actually a win, and it happened at the end of the summer on PlanetPoker. Silicon Valley had some of the best fiber in the country, so Bobby’s Internet was lightning fast and stable compared to what I’d been used to in Missouri. The connection to Planet’s server was shaky because they were hosting out of either Costa Rica or Antigua using a shared satellite link to the mainland. Downtimes were standard, and often the lag was so bad that the games were unplayable.

Sometimes I’d be in the middle of a hand and the game would freeze. When this happened, their software would give all-in protection to players who were still active in the hand, halting the betting and dealing the hand out.

One night I was playing a \$10/20 Hold’em game on Planet when I was dealt $K♥K♠$. I raised preflop, got re-raised, and capped it. Three of us saw the flop of $K♦Q♠T♣$. The first player checked to me and I bet out \$10. The next

player tanked. He thought for a long time... too long. His time bank expired and he was still thinking.

Then we were all sitting out and I was \$80 richer. The connection had lagged and all-in protection had triggered. I won the pot, but it should have been much bigger. I was furious.

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“NOOOOO! Damn it, dude!”

Bobby looked over from his laptop and raised an eyebrow. I told my bad beat story while staring disgustedly at the Planet software on my screen. Bobby shook his head and frowned. He didn't say anything. That's because Bobby knew the right thing to say to someone who is telling you a bad beat is nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I was so mad. I had won the hand, but it felt like I lost.

“Online poker is such bullshit, dude. They are raking hand over fist off these games and they can't spring for a stable connection?!? I'm so tired of this bullshit, bro! It's like a bunch of kids were running a lemonade stand and then decided, 'hey let's reinvest our profits into a poker site.' They're probably running the whole thing out of their parents' basement somewhere on an old Acer laptop. It's such fucking bullshit dude... I was supposed to win like... ”

I went on with my rant for another four hours.

“... And I hate that creepy little smile their floorman is always wearing. And his lame-ass tuxedo. Someone really should make a better site than this bullshit!”

Bobby quietly listened until I ran out of steam. Then he said, “Come on bro. Let's go chill in the hot tub.” We threw on some trunks and headed to the pool area of his apartment complex. Bobby had grabbed a legal pad and a pen.

“So... how much exactly do you think they are making?”

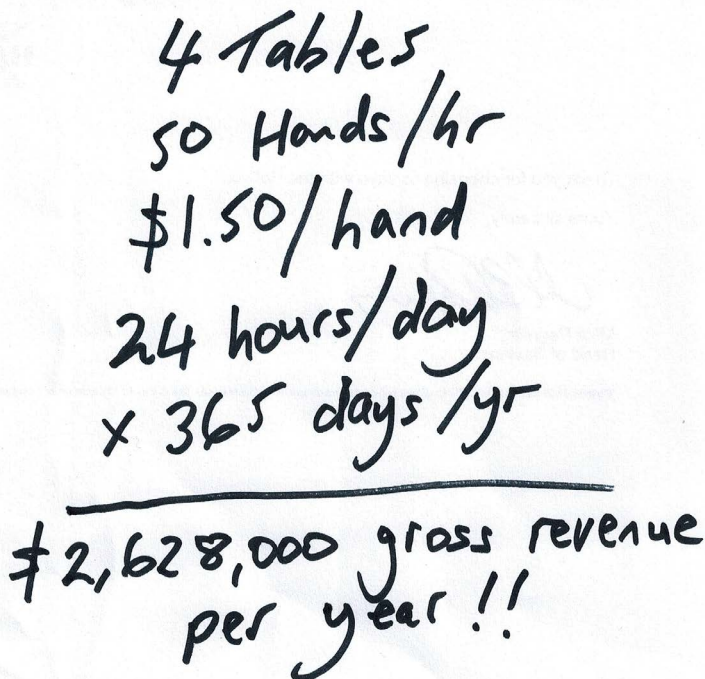
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Life Lesson #11

The right thing to say when someone tells you a bad beat is nothing. Absolutely nothing.

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We made some rough calculations with some even rougher assumptions. I estimated that PlanetPoker was running four tables on average, each dealing fifty hands an hour. Planet modeled their rake structure on Vegas, which raked 10% per pot up to \$3. Not every pot would reach the full \$30, so I estimated that each hand was worth \$1.50 in rake.



4 Tables
50 Hands/hr
\$1.50/hand
24 hours/day
x 365 days/yr

\$2,628,000 gross revenue
per year !!

Bobby estimated it would take three solid engineers six months part-time to build a similar site. He also estimated Planet was paying \$2,000/mo for the server and bandwidth, \$8,000/mo for a customer support team, \$10,000/mo for the software team, and \$10,000/mo on marketing. That was \$360,000/yr in business expenses. When all was said and done, we figured PlanetPoker.com was pulling in \$2.25 million in profit every year. And they were growing every day.

By the end of our hot tub soaking session, we had gone from “someone should make a better poker site” to “we should make a better poker site.” On the way back to his apartment, Bobby asked a question that even after three years of law school hadn’t even occurred to me.

“Is it legal?”

I didn’t know.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tulips of Silicon Valley

“Pioneers get the arrows and settlers get the land.”

Unknown

The first online multi-table poker tournament for real money occurred on September 10, 2000. Despite everything that happened, I still look back on that day with pride. Bobby and I created online poker tournaments. We invented them.

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In 1999, the whole Valley was in a state of frenzy. Hiring more. Raising more. The theme of the day was “get big or get lost.” Bobby’s company, Frontier GlobalCenter, had been acquired by Global Crossing. As he looked around his office, seeing new faces every day, he became more disillusioned with the dot-com boom.

It seemed like anyone with a business idea could get funding as long as they had an “e-” or “.com” in their name of the company. Yet very few companies were actually making money. Everyone thought the Internet had changed the fundamental rules of business. Market share mattered. Profit not so much.

Bobby and I now had our own big dot-com idea. Online poker wasn’t a huge market, but the profit margins were obscenely high and we saw a massive potential for growth. We brainstormed names. Our first pick was ePoker.com, but it was already registered. So was iPoker and WebPoker. We finally found an available name which sounded right.

PokerSpot.com.



Summer had ended and it was time to go back to Missouri to finish up my last two undergraduate courses at CMSU. Coming from the third year of law school, I figured I'd have a lot of time to work on PokerSpot. I thought my last undergrad semester would be a cakewalk. It was.

I'd be working on the Pokerspot project during my free time. My role was to determine whether our idea was legal and then figure out how to setup the business side of the company. It was an overwhelming task that I didn't want to take on alone.

Bobby started working on the software. He searched for engineers to help work on the project for an equity basis. Bobby found a few good candidates. One code monkey living in the valley named Brad, and another in Finland named Sami Vaaraniemi. Brad burned out after a couple of weeks, but Sami would be with us until the bitter end.



Back in Missouri, I reconnected with Matt Winfrey, who had been studying for the bar before I left. He was waiting for the bar results and planned on entering JAG after he passed (which he wouldn't). I met with him in Columbia to get his thoughts on PokerSpot and try to convince him to be a part of it.

I had already shown him Planet before we graduated in May, so he was familiar with the idea of online poker. I presented my business plan, showed him the numbers, and explained how Planet was raking money. We agreed to an equity split where Bobby and I would each keep 35%, while Matt and Sami would each take 15%.

There was no denying it. The numbers looked good. The first question Matt asked was:

“Is it legal?”



One of the first things you learn in Criminal Law is the old legal adage “whatever is not illegal is legal”. Matt and I spent a few hours in the law library researching the question of whether operating an online cardroom would be breaking the law.

The first statute we found was 18 U.S.C. § 1084, known as the Federal Wire Act. This 1961 law prohibits using a “wire communications facility” (which the Internet certainly is) to assist in the placing of bets or wagers on any “sporting event or contest.” We concluded that the Federal Wire Act only covered sports betting, and didn’t apply to online poker.

We then turned to the state laws. Almost every state has laws specifically addressing poker and most of them aren’t positive. If we put the servers in pretty much any state, we’d be breaking at least that state’s law.

So it made sense why all of the online gambling sites, including Planet, were hosting their servers offshore. Matt and I reasoned that if we followed suit and hosted the game servers in Antigua or Costa Rica, then that’s where the gambling would happen. We concluded PokerSpot would be legal.



Life Lesson #12
People see what they want to see.



Thinking back, I’m certain we answered the legality question wrong. Many have claimed that online poker is in a legal grey area. I disagree. Online poker in the USA is and always has been black and white, clear as crystal, illegal.

Gambling is a state issue and poker is gambling. If poker is illegal in Florida (which it is), and my cowriter and I sit in the same room in Florida for a high stakes headsup match, then we are breaking Florida law. It is absurd to think

if we put our laptops together Battleship-style and login to our favorite online cardroom, that somehow we are no longer breaking the same Florida law. The gambling happens where the players sit.

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Some argue that while Florida poker players gambling online may be breaking their state law, as long as the servers are in a jurisdiction where online poker is legal, then the operator is not violating the law.

This argument is nonsense. Putting the servers in Costa Rica just means that now the gambling is happening in an additional place. The game is being operated in both Florida and Costa Rica. The only people who take seriously the ridiculous argument that somehow an offshore server transports a poker game are poker site owners and their lawyers.

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A lot of my friends in Antigua would make the argument that they couldn't possibly be breaking US law because they weren't in the US. They weren't even American citizens.

This too is nonsense. If a Canadian hacker living in Antigua wipes out a victim's Arizona bank account, the hacker would obviously be breaking some Arizona laws. You don't have to be physically in a state to break that state's laws.

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A lot of people have argued that since poker has a high skill element, it doesn't qualify as gambling.

Nonsense. Anybody who has ever had aces cracked knows that there is a high element of chance to poker. If you put up something of value and have the potential for either a win or a loss, then you are gambling. It doesn't matter what game you are playing. Betting on billiards is gambling. Betting on Scrabble is gambling. Betting on Rock-Paper-Scissors is gambling.

Crossing the street is not gambling, because you can't win value... you can only lose value. But betting your friend that you can make it across the street without getting hit by a car is gambling. Betting on a stock is gambling. Betting on golf is gambling. Betting on a business is gambling.

Betting on poker is gambling.



There are some sites which have tried to sidestep state laws on gambling by removing the chance factor. One such site is SkillBet, which claims legality in 26 states. They created a version of poker similar to duplicate bridge. Each person plays a certain amount of hands against computer opponents, but they are competing against other humans who play the exact same hands against the exact same bots.

Somehow, this bastardized form of poker is supposed to be 100% skill. I have no doubt, though, that if Phil Ivey and I played one hundred of these duplicate poker matches I'd at least win a handful of them. I've already conceded that Ivey is a more skillful player than I, but he wouldn't win 100% of our matches. There is obviously a chance element at work here.

Sites like Skillbet are seeing what they want to see. They are confusing a paid legal opinion with the reality of what constitutes gambling. They believe they are operating legally under Utah law, which prohibits all forms of gambling and has even preemptively opted-out of any federal laws which might legalize it.

I would challenge Skillbet to rent a conference center in Salt Lake City and host a \$500 buy-in tournament called the Skillbet Open. According to their paid legal opinion, this would be considered 100% skill and they would be immune to prosecution under Utah law. I would bet they would spend at least a night in jail and probably more in prison.



It doesn't even matter if you remove all of the randomization elements in a game. If you bet on a game then you are gambling.

Consider Rock-Paper-Scissors again, which is a game I really like to play with Bobby. In 2005, ESPN hosted a World Series of Rock-Paper-Scissors as part of their Nuts segment. Bobby played and won, defeating Rafe Furst headsup. The next year, ESPN hosted a rematch between Bobby and Rafe. Bobby won again.

According to ESPN, my little brother is the greatest Rock-Paper-Scissors player in the world. He's the Stu Ungar of roshambo.

There is no randomization element in the game of Rock-Paper-Scissors. You decide what to throw and throw it hoping your opponent makes the throw you beat. That year, Annie Duke tried to use the serial numbers of a dollar bill to "randomly" determine her throw. But simply randomizing the way you determine your throw doesn't make the throw itself random. It's a subtle difference, but it's there.

Even though there is no randomization element in Rock-Paper-Scissors, it is still a game of chance. If it wasn't, I would never beat my brother throwing rock.

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One more absurd example to really drill the point home. If you or I played chess with Kasparov a trillion times a trillion times, we could eventually through dumb luck, find ourselves the winner. A monkey slamming on a keyboard for infinity years really *would* eventually write the complete works of Shakespeare.

But it would almost certainly write this book first.

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Life Lesson #13
Every game is a game of chance.

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Enough about luck vs. skill. The point is Matt and I both thought running an online poker site would be legal. Now I think we were wrong. One point that somewhat justified our earlier legal conclusion was that PlanetPoker operated for more than a year and nobody suggested Randy Blumer was committing multiple felonies every single day.

Everybody broke the law. All of the players. All of the owners. All the facilitators. All the promoters. Caesars, Travel Channel, ESPN, Google, Yahoo, MSN.

If everybody is breaking a law and nobody is enforcing it, after a while you start to think that it's not really a law at all.

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In 1997, a California woman named Cynthia Haines signed up for several credit cards, deposited \$70,000 into offshore gambling sites, and went on a big losing streak. When it came time to start paying for the loss, she sued Visa

and MasterCard. Her argument was that online gambling was illegal and that Visa and MasterCard were breaking the law by facilitating the illegal activity. Credit card companies were essentially acting as enforcers for online casinos, muscling victims to collect unlawful debts.

In interviews, Cynthia Haines denied that she had a gambling problem. She wouldn't admit to being a compulsive gambler who had blown her money playing negative expectation games. Instead, she insisted the offshore casinos were rigged.

In 1999, the parties settled the lawsuit. Cynthia recovered her losses. Visa and MasterCard stopped processing online gambling transactions. Discover and American Express would do the same.

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All of us involved in PokerSpot were too focused on the question of *can* we do it rather than *should* we do it. Is poker really a positive? Or is our world perhaps worse off because people gamble on cards?

I can make a convincing argument that poker *is* positive. My argument goes like this:

“Poker is a social activity which provides a number of benefits. First is the social benefit. Poker fosters friendships and provides a setting for people to engage in social contact with others in their community. Second is the economic benefit. Poker provides jobs which are funded by people with discretionary money to spend, and is a meritocracy which allows for quick upward socioeconomic mobility for its more skilled participants. Third is the entertainment benefit. Poker provides a high level of entertainment to participants and more recently to home viewers, which allows a cathartic escape from the tedium of work. Fourth, and finally, is the scientific benefit. Poker provides a context, a laboratory if you will, in which to discover and test new scientific knowledge in disciplines ranging from mathematics, game theory, probability, psychology, artificial intelligence and behavioral economics.”

It's a valid argument, but I'm not convinced the positives outweigh the negatives. Of course, if you think poker is a social negative, it isn't consistent to think of the NFL or NASCAR any differently.

On the other hand, if you think poker is a social positive, then you probably have to think the same about any type of online gambling. It's incredibly depressing to imagine someone sitting alone in their house, crying, gambling away their family's life savings on an online slot machine.

The problem with poker is people can lose and most of them do.

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Life Lesson #14
There are three sides to every coin.

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When I was working on PokerSpot, I didn't ask the tough questions because I was a selfish teenager. Normal people see that as a bad trait. I do as well. Yet selfishness, while being looked down on by most people, is consistently rewarded by our society and by poker specifically. Ayn Rand built a whole career out of the basic principle that selfishness is a virtue.

The single decision that hurt poker the most was when Randy Blumer integrated the Vegas rake structure (i.e. charging 10% of the pot up to \$3) into the PlanetPoker business model. This decision created the same poker economy online as exists in Vegas, where the majority of players lose. Except online, the process happens much quicker. Players are able to play more hands per hour and more hours per week. As a result, online money flows up the player pyramid and down the rake hole much faster than live money.

It's easy to see how and why Randy borrowed the Vegas rake. There were no online cardrooms to base the Planet model on, so it was natural to look to brick-n-mortar counterparts. To his credit, he could have made things even worse for poker players by adopting the rake structure of California cardrooms, which

charges the same drop every flop regardless of pot-size. The California drop is much more oppressive to a poker player's expected value (EV) than the Vegas rake.

Planet didn't really know what the profit margins would look like. They didn't have any idea what the reception would be to the new project, or whether they'd be able to keep even a single game going. Randy and the PlanetPoker team were the first pioneers of online poker.



The cynical take on the PlanetPoker decision to charge the Vegas rake online is simply that they thought the market would tolerate the price. They were right. It reminds me of an old poker joke.

There's a hapless asthmatic gambler named David. David is a regular player in a poker game. The game is in a tiny room at the back of a warehouse in the worst part of town where carjackings are frequent. The little poker room is thick with cigar smoke. The dealer in the game was an aspiring close-up magician until he lost his pinky in a prop bet gone wrong and is nicknamed "Bring in the Cooler" Jimmy. The game is raked at 50% of the pot. With no cap. It's run by a local mobster whose close friends call "Dicky the Cheat" but everyone else just calls Rich.

David comes home from the game every week, defeated and broke, always hacking, sometimes car-less. His wife yells at him. "Why do you play that game, Joe? Don't you know you can't win?" He shrugs and replies, "What choice do I have? It's the only game in town!"

To most poker players, the rake is opaque. The charge to play every hand is taken directly from the pot. So the majority of players don't really see it as a cost to them unless they win the hand. And if they win, they don't miss the \$3. This idea that you only pay if you win isn't the right way to view the rake in poker. It's better to see the cost in a long-term averaged out way that players pay by the hour. If there are 9 players at a live Vegas table charging a rake of \$3/hand, assuming they get fast dealers and 40 hands in an hour, each player

at the table is paying \$13/hr to play poker. Consider a \$2/4 game in California with a \$3 drop and an average player buy-in of \$40. The house is busting three players an hour.

The rake gets pretty ridiculous online, where there is no shuffling between hands, no misdeals, instant awarding of the pot, instant stacking of the chips, and timed actions. It's not uncommon to see online cash games fly by at 80+ hands/hr, with each player paying \$20+/hr for their seat. And then a player can sit in more than one game. If you have a guy playing three 9-seater \$5/10 Limit Hold'em games breezing by at 80 hands/hr and hitting that \$3 rake cap every hand... he's paying \$80/hr to play poker!

The average hand at Planet was slower than you see in today's online games, but it was still fast. Very fast. They were busting players left and right.

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In the poker economy, the rake is the factor which determines the percentage of players that can win. Online, the number is around 30%. That's the amount of the player base which can be break-even or better.

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Imagine a poker economy where the majority of players were winning. It could have happened.

It already happens at the highest stakes games, where the rake is insignificant compared to the average player buy-in. In the \$200/400 mixed game at Aria, the amount players pay to the house is insignificant compared to the average player buy-in. As a result, the majority of those players are able to reach the break-even or better point, their winnings fueled by the heavy losses of the losers.

I'm not saying you should jump into the highest limit game in the cardroom. Even most of the losing players at the \$200/400 are world-class, and would easily win at a \$10/20. But where the rake is insignificant, the majority of players can be winners.



When Matt and I were looking at the price point for PokerSpot, we based it on Planet's rake structure. We suspected that as more online cardrooms entered the market, eventually the sites would engage in a rake war, enticing players by offering lower and lower rakes.

We can see this type of race to the bottom happen everywhere. It's why you can buy a laptop at Walmart for less than \$200. It's why new video game consoles sell for less than their manufacturing cost, and why generic drugs that fall off patent sell for \$4 a bottle.

But the rake wars never happened. Instead, the online poker industry would engage in a marketing war. Rather than cutting the playing cost, and reducing the amount that a real-money player was worth to the online poker site, the operators increased their acquisition cost (i.e. the money they were willing to spend on marketing to buy a new player).

A few cardrooms later entered the market thinking a reduced rake would send a wave of players. These entrants faded away when their strategy failed and they were unable to keep up with the marketing dollars spent by their competition.



In August 1999, a book was published by Anthony Cabot called the *Internet Gambling Report III*. Today you can buy a used copy on Amazon for less than a dollar, but at the time it was a pretty expensive book. It was regarded as a must read on the few gambling operator forums I was able to find. I cashed out some money from Planet and sprang for a copy.

Matt and I poured over the book. The small Caribbean island of Antigua had become the capital of online gambling since the first online sportsbook, WSEX.com, opened their virtual doors in the tiny jurisdiction. The country had structured its business laws to be friendly to online gambling operators. Matt and I decided Antigua would be the perfect place to incorporate Pokerspot.

It didn't look like Antigua would be the best place to locate our servers. The bandwidth was slow and sketchy, which is a problem for any online casino or sportsbook, but more so for an online cardroom. More prohibitive was that we would need a gaming license to operate poker servers from Antigua, which would cost \$50,000. We didn't have that much money, or really any money at that point. So we looked at other options. Costa Rica seemed like the place. The bandwidth was cheaper and more stable. To operate poker games out of a server farm in Costa Rica, we would only need to spring for a \$200 business license. The server itself would cost about \$3,000 and bandwidth would be around \$1,000/mo.

We discovered that the biggest initial cost was going to be the payment processor. After the Cynthia Haines lawsuit caused the major credit card companies to pull out of the online gaming industry, very few processors were willing to accept credit card payments for online casinos. There were still a handful who would, though. These were generally overseas operations, and I didn't quite understand how they were able to continue processing. Today, I realize they were mislabeling transactions to get approved by Visa and MasterCard, and this was clear fraud. Online gambling sites continued to operate and grow, taking in more money by the day in credit card deposits despite the Haines decision.

Matt and I found an Australian-based company called ePayment Solutions (EPS) which was processing for online gambling sites. We called them and they were willing to process transactions for an online poker site, but they'd require a hefty deposit of \$10,000, hold a 20% rolling reserve of all incoming deposits for six months, and charge a 7% transaction fee on each purchase.

Bobby continued working full-time at Global Crossing while slaving nights and weekends on the Pokerspot software, passing lines of server and client code back and forth between Sami who was doing the same thing in Finland. Matt spent most of that fall studying for his second shot at the bar, which was coming up in February. I continued working on the Pokerspot business plan during my last semester at CMSU.

Besides the cost to setup the Antiguan corporate entity, turn on the payment processor, and get the Costa Rican servers running, we were going to need a website and graphics for the client (table, lobby and cashier). We were going to need some money.

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“You can’t top pigs with pigs.”
Walt Disney

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After the initial success of Planet Poker, a number of other sites started to appear. They all used the same software package as Planet, which had been commissioned by Blumer from a software development shop called ASF, ran by Ramon Nunez. The new sites all used the same ASF software as Planet and included sites like DeltaPoker.com, Poker.com and HighlandsClub.com (which was partially owned by Doyle Brunson). These copycats would remain distant followers to the first-mover in online poker.

Then in September 1999, a new operator entered the market called ParadisePoker.com. The Paradise software looked great. It was polished and fast and all around better than Planet and the ASF package. Paradise didn’t announce their launch before opening. The site appeared like magic, taking everyone by surprise. What was even *more* surprising was that the site was completely full from day one. There would be heavy speculation that Paradise was using dumb bots to get the action started and some inside sources make me think that the “zero day bot theory” is plausible.

The same week Paradise launched, Planet started experiencing massive connectivity issues. For a full month, the site was completely unstable. Planet’s connection problems caused a massive migration of players right into the tables of their new competitor. Paradise became the market leader virtually overnight.

I met Randy and his wife, Beverly, a few times. Randy would tell me he suspected the connectivity problem coinciding with the new launch was not just a happy coincidence for Paradise. He suspected Paradise launched what is known as a distributed denial of service attack, or a DDOS, on the Planet servers.

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The Paradise launch made our Pokerspot team feel like we were running out of time. We started to put unrealistic deadlines on our work, thinking our window of opportunity was quickly closing. We still saw plenty of features lacking in the Paradise software which we could capitalize on.

Paradise had launched with Seven Card Stud and Omaha, which were absent in the Planet software, but they didn't include the split-pot hi-low variants that were popular in California. They also didn't have tournaments. No one had them. I thought if we were first to offer poker tournaments, we could take over the market. We set an aggressive goal to launch by the end of March 2000.

I often hear people talk about "first-mover advantage" when they are introducing a new business idea. There is no such thing. The first attempt to summit Everest ended in seven deaths. Many first attempts to fly ended in similar fashion. Amazon wasn't the first online book retailer, nor Google the first search engine. Facebook wasn't the first social network. Instead of being first, these businesses each took a proven model and made it better.

If the online poker industry has taught me anything, it's that unless you are trying to make history or have an invention you can protect with a patent, there isn't much of an advantage being first.

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Life Lesson #15
It's better to be late to a party than early.



By the end of the semester, my mom and stepfather Rich had moved back to Columbia, MO into the house I had been renting with my law school buddies. Mom had gotten a secretary job at Boone County National Bank and Rich had taken a pharmacy position at Ellis-Fischel Hospital. Bobby flew back to Missouri for Thanksgiving and we told my parents about our plans for Pokerspot.

Mom was less than thrilled about the whole idea. She had been so excited during my law school graduation and wanted to see me pursue a law career. But I didn't want to be a lawyer. I wanted to be a dot-com millionaire.

Rich was more enthusiastic. Like so many Silicon Valley venture capitalists, he jumped at the chance to be part of the next big dot-com. I figured on it taking \$50,000 to startup. Rich offered to put in the money without even seeing the business plan. When we started talking about equity, he waved off the negotiation. "Just promise to take care of me when you boys make it big." Bobby and I should have insisted on that equity negotiation. It was a glaring business mistake to disregard how that initial cash infusion should be treated. If Pokerspot had blown up, Rich would have surely seen his cash as an investment in the business and expected a pretty big cut of the resulting profits. It would have basically amounted to a windfall. If our business failed, which it ultimately did, he'd see it as a personal loan and expect us to pay it back as such.

Rich was looking at his \$50k bet as a freeroll, but I doubt he was trying to take advantage of us. I think he just had too much confidence in our abilities and wanted to be the one to help his two stepsons reach the success we felt destined for. The idea Pokerspot would fail wasn't really considered by any of us.

Bobby and I didn't overthink it. We were happy to have jumped over what we thought would be the hurdle keeping us from a big pile of money.

Bobby quit his job. We had our funding.

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Life Lesson #16
Never start a business with your parents' money.

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At the end of 1999, I finished college. There is something magical about the feeling you get when turning in your very last exam, knowing you will never have to drag yourself out of bed for another class. I would never have to crack another college textbook. I was finished with school. After seven years, I had a Bachelors and a J.D. I was glad for it to be over. Some experiences are better remembered than lived.

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I headed back to Mountain View to continue working on Pokerspot with Bobby. Matt stayed behind in Missouri, but would come out to join us in March after he retook the bar. He'd pass the second time around, going into the test nowhere near as confident as the first time he took it.

Matt and I stayed with Bobby in the same one-bedroom apartment which hadn't changed since my stay there last summer. The walls were still bare, there was still no furniture, and still nothing edible in the fridge.

I bought an air mattress and set-up a makeshift space in Bobby's empty living room. Matt did the same in the empty dining room, except he used a sleeping bag insisting it was more comfortable than an air mattress. We both worked sitting on the floor.

Matt called some law firms in Antigua which specialized in incorporating offshore businesses. We settled on one in St. John's. Setting up an offshore corporation is kind of like ordering a pizza. You've got the basic setup fee for the corporate filing, then you add toppings. We ordered a thin-crust with the

Articles of Incorporation, bylaws, stock certificates, and registered agent, with a corporate seal and embosser as extra cheese. A few days later we had an Antiguan corporation: PSI Inc. We setup a bank account and shipped the \$50k investment we got from Rich as the opening deposit.

We needed a website, so Matt and I tried to save money by working up something passable in Microsoft Paint and HTML. We worked day and night for a week. When it was finished, Matt and I looked at each other and shook our heads. Bobby said what we were thinking.

“Our site looks like shit.”

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Bobby found a good 3D artist for the software graphics and a designer for the logo and website. We cut our first corporate checks. Here is what we bought.

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The Logo



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The Lounge



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The Cashier



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The Table



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After we received the graphics, I wrote our site's content and Matt worked with the processor (EPS), setting up our merchant account. We sent EPS a check and Bobby hooked into their API. Matt and I worked with one of his friends designing ads for Card Player and Poker Digest, as well as a few banners for PokerPages.com.

Then we waited.

The end of March was coming fast and Bobby didn't seem to be close to finishing the software. Matt and I mostly spent the days surfing the Internet and berating Bobby to code quicker.

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Aaron Patzer, the founder of Mint.com, gave a talk where he said, "when valuing a startup, add \$500,000 for every engineer, and subtract \$250,000 for

every MBA.” While it was probably said as a joke, I have to admit the concept is sound. I think you should subtract even more for every JD.

In the early stages of a startup, everyone needs to be doing something to move the ball forward. Matt and I found ourselves at a point in the PokerSpot business where we didn’t have anything to do. We felt useless because we *were* useless. Deadweight, waiting for the day when we could turn the site on and have something to do again.

Tensions really started to rise. Bobby resented us for not doing anything, and we resented him for not having the technical part of the project finished on our time schedule.

What Matt and I should have been doing is breaking open *C++ for Dummies*, rolling up our sleeves, and getting down and dirty in the binary trenches with my little brother and Sami. It was unfair to expect Bobby to do all the heavy lifting while we sat around his apartment criticizing his pace. We probably wouldn’t have been able to do much, but we could at least have done *something*.

I did a good chunk of the higher-level design work. I drafted the wireframes of the client and I also worked with Bobby on some of the game logic algorithms implemented in the server code. I did quite a bit of quality control. A few weeks before release, while beta testing the software, I made a wheel and lost the pot to a pair. Bobby didn’t know that aces could be counted as high and low. But I didn’t write a single one of the nearly 200,000 lines in the server and client code.

The attitude Matt and I took towards PokerSpot is similar to a lot of “entrepreneurs” trying to get a startup going. They come up with some idea and then search forever looking for a technical partner to build it for sweat equity. Such projects rarely get off the ground unless the “entrepreneur” has a close friend or family member willing to be exploited.

If you have a great technical idea, don’t rely on other people to build it for you. Get technical.



After what seemed like an eternity, Bobby told us we were almost ready. We wouldn't have tournaments, or the non-Hold'em games, but we could launch with Limit Hold'em in a week. Matt and I placed our ads in Card Player and Poker Digest, bought a banner on PokerPages, and announced the launch date on RGP.

When launch day came, we gathered around a computer in the middle of Bobby's Mountain View living room. A few players downloaded the software. Then a few more. A player made a credit card deposit into the site. Then a few more. A player signed up to the \$3/6 list. Then another signed up and a table session started on the server. They were dealt in and the game started. Once that first hand was over, and the first Pokerspot player was awarded his pot, the three of us held our breaths praying a technical glitch wouldn't keep the next hand from being dealt.

The second hand was dealt.

The three of us cheered and high fived each other. Our software worked beautifully. It was smooth and fast. Soon another player joined. Then another. We had built something special.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Rise and Fall of Pokerspot

“Everything ends badly, otherwise it wouldn’t end.”
Cocktail (1988)

People in poker forums have suggested Pokerspot failed because we were giving away too much money in promotions and freerolls. While we did give away quite a bit of money to our players, it wasn’t the reason for Pokerspot’s eventual failure. On paper, Pokerspot was turning a profit from the first month we launched.

Pokerspot failed for the same reasons which brought down so many other online poker sites, from Highlands Club to Full Tilt Poker. We failed because of bad processors and our own inexperience in assessing and managing the risks of processing credit cards for online poker deposits. It all goes back to the Cynthia Haines case.

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It was the end of May 2000 and there was still a lot of coding to finish. Pokerspot launched with a surge of traffic generated by our advertising buzz. Our software was polished and pretty. Gameplay was just as fast as Paradise and faster than Planet.

In the beginning, though, there wasn’t really a good reason to play on Pokerspot as opposed to a competitor with a bigger user base. It’s known as the “empty restaurant problem” and is an issue every new cardroom faces... no one goes because no one is there. It’s particularly a problem online because another site is just a click away.

Pokerspot offered the same games as the competition, the same rake as the competition, and basically the same look and feel as the competition. But it offered fewer games and fewer opponents. Why should anyone play there? It was just a “me too” cardroom. A copy of something else with no real competitive edge.

I was convinced that we would soon have the competitive edge we’d need. It would be tournaments. Matt and Bobby didn’t understand the huge difference tournaments could make. They hadn’t felt the rush of winning one.



Within a few weeks after launch, Matt and I decided to move out of Bobby’s apartment. We thought Pokerspot’s profit justified renting a small workspace. Matt suggested St. Louis, where he had grown up. We both flew back to Missouri and left Bobby behind to continue working on the software. We found a two-bedroom apartment in South City, each took a room, and used the living room as our office.

Matt and I took turns answering the customer support queue and handling cashout requests. Matt would eventually do the bulk of this work, and I would spend the days planning new ways to market the cardroom, spamming the rpg newsgroup, and decoding Pokerspot’s vital numbers.

I realized we had missed something in our initial design. At the time I didn’t have a name for it, but now I know that “something” is called a back-end. The back-end is the piece of online poker software which allows the operators to make sense of what is going on. It’s the automated processes which query the database. It’s the graphical user interface which allows the operators to make sense of the data and tweak it. The back-end is what makes a cardroom manageable.

We didn’t have a back-end. We just had Bobby. If we wanted to know how many hands were dealt, we’d ask Bobby. If we wanted to know how much rake we made, we’d ask Bobby. If we needed to credit a player’s account because of a software bug, we’d tell Bobby. In each case, he’d code up a unique MySQL

query for the job. It started to be a joke, with the punchline always ending the same. “Better call Bobby.”

The lack of a back-end was a big design oversight, and one I suspect a lot of other cardrooms made as well. It was difficult to track even the most basic information. Important questions such as “what percentage of our visitors convert into real-money players” and “how much is a Poker Digest signup worth in comparison to a Card Player signup” would go unanswered.

It started to become a big problem. The bug list was growing and more feature requests were being added by the day. Bobby’s work on the tournament module, which I counted as priority number one, was delayed by maintenance and busy work. I finally decided to roll up my sleeves and actually do something productive. I bought a few books on MySQL, spent a week teaching myself, and started writing code.

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One function a back-end should have is allowing the marketing team to email groups of players, including the entire user base. During our second month in June, the daily signups slowed down along with incoming deposits. We’d usually have one game that would fire in the afternoon and break around midnight. In our first week of launch, we had reached the milestone of having a game go all night and continue through the next day. That milestone hadn’t repeated since. The one regular game we did have began to start later and break earlier.

I came up with a marketing idea I thought would help Pokerspot’s activity bounce back. I estimated each player was paying roughly \$10/hr in rake (this turned out to be a bit of an underestimate, but without a back-end I had no way of knowing the exact figures). My idea was to create what is now known as a “rake race”. We would give the first fifty players to reach ten hours of play a \$100 credit into their account, and the first five players to reach one hundred hours of play would get \$1,000. It was in effect a rakeback promotion.

Matt and I wrote the promotion details in an email, but we didn’t have the tools to send it to all the players in our database. So we called Bobby. A few

minutes after he spammed the email, we started receiving angry complaints from customers. Bobby had committed one of the cardinal sins of emailing, CC'ing rather than BCC'ing our entire user list. Our customers were each sent the emails of every other customer on our site. It was a fairly big mistake. Internet customers, especially online poker players, generally value their privacy. There was a backlash on the newsgroups, and Matt and I had our hands full apologizing and assuring angry customers it was a one-time mistake.

I like remembering this story. Because of all the massive fuckups that would eventually lead to the Pokerspot failure and the evaporation of over \$300,000 in player deposits, this mistake, and only this one, belonged entirely to Bobby. This was Bobby's fuckup.

The rest of them all belonged to Matt and me.



We only had one bank account for Pokerspot. Looking back, this was terribly irresponsible and gross mismanagement. I was still a teenager and had exactly zero experience running a business. My liberal arts BA and my law degree didn't cover the first thing about best business practices.

I wouldn't realize how obvious to everyone else the business practice of segregating accounts seems until Full Tilt would suffer their Black Friday blow, and it was revealed that they were also not segregating player funds.

But not segregating player funds, while admittedly a bad business practice, wasn't the problem, nor was it fraud per se. If you dump all of the business funds, profits, and player deposits together into a big potato sack, it's only a deception if you claim you are holding them separately. Our problem was treating credit card deposits as money in hand and putting blind faith in the processors.

In our first month of operation, Pokerspot generated about \$30,000 in player deposits, of which \$10,000 was raked and counted as gross revenue. Our processor, EPS, would charge a 7% fee of the total deposits (\$2,100). Then

they would hold 20% of the deposits as a “rolling reserve” against chargebacks (\$6,000). Most significantly, they would hold all the deposits for as much as forty-five days, sending over a wire on the 15th of every month for the previous month’s deposits.

When we launched Pokerspot, our startup costs had eaten away half of the \$50,000 that my stepfather had put into the business. By the time the first EPS wire hit our Nevis account, we had already been taking player deposits for more than a month and each of those deposits was immediately credited to the players’ accounts. We treated the deposits the same as if the players had physically walked up to a cashier cage and bought Pokerspot chips with cash.

The moment Pokerspot arguably began engaging in fraud happened around our fourth week of operation. It occurred when a player deposited money into our cardroom and we credited them an amount of chips that, combined with all of the chips on the system, exceeded the amount we held in our offshore bank account.

Even now, I hesitate to call this moment fraud, which refers more to a calculated deception for financial gain. After all, we didn’t understand the risk. We didn’t consider the possibility that EPS wouldn’t wire us the amount we credited to the player. So to call it fraud is a bit unfair because it really amounts more to negligent misrepresentation.

Fraud would come later.

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“No one will find me to have willingly committed fraud.”

Bernard Ebbers, WorldCom CEO

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There is an implicit promise made to a poker player that when they buy chips from a casino they will be able to cash them out again. If there is even the smallest chance a cashout might not be possible, whether it’s the casino’s fault

or not, then a good argument exists for fraud. This happens way more than we would like to admit, and players only call it fraud when their money is gone. Yet the fraud is committed when they deposit.

Consider this example of an underground poker game in New York. Halfway through the night, masked gunmen enter the room and rob the cage of all the money. When the robbers leave, the players are staring at worthless clay chips. The host shrugs and says, "Sorry boys, looks like we're all losers tonight. Hope this won't keep you from coming in next week."

Is this example fraud? Maybe. What if the host received an anonymous phone call warning him of the impending robbery, and hosted the game anyway without telling the players? Probably fraud. What if the host commissioned the robbery? Definitely fraud.

Now consider the case of PokerStars. When Black Friday hit, and over two million US poker players had their account balances frozen on the big three sites (Stars, Tilt, and UB/Absolute), all three sites were committing fraud. Besides tagging player deposits as non-gambling purchases to get around the Visa and MasterCard rules, which was blatant fraud, they were also allowing their players to believe funds on deposit were 100% safe when they were anything but.

On Black Friday, the Department of Justice seized seventy-six bank accounts in fourteen different countries containing upwards of \$500 million in player deposits (or at least in what began as player deposits). Yet PokerStars was able to begin cashouts to their US player base within eleven days, largely escaping criticism.

PokerStars was able to make good on their US player deposits because they held enough of those deposits, not to mention massive and largely illegal profits, in accounts that were not seized by the DOJ. Full Tilt and UB/Absolute was unable to do the same, and charges of fraud within the poker community soon followed.

All of these sites committed fraud. But the fraud against players occurred at the moment when these sites took deposits, not at the moment when they couldn't honor them. It's a subtle distinction that most poker players miss.

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Back to the summer of 2000, when most of these sites weren't even a thought. The Pokerspot rake race was a success. It filled the cardroom with a core group of players and ensured new players visiting the site would have a game to sit in. Pokerspot wouldn't fizzle out that summer.

Our cardroom continued to show week-to-week growth. EPS continued to send the wires on time. Bobby and Sami continued working hard on the addition of variable betting, split games and the tournament module. I continued to build up the back-end tools.

Pokerspot grew by more than 20% per month. Our future looked bright.

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For the last couple of years at the Rio, after the last hand of the summer has been dealt in the WSOP Main Event, the Pavilion, Brasilia and Amazon rooms are quickly emptied of their rows of tables. The massive collection of poker players disappears and is replaced by a throng of the world's greatest hackers. More than ten thousand cyberpunks fill the halls and conference rooms that Hellmuth and Brunson called home only weeks before.

It's called Defcon, and is the world's largest hacker convention. If you visit the Rio during the first week of August, it's best to leave your credit cards and cellphone at home.

The founder of Defcon is Jeff Moss, also known as TheDarkTangent in the #hack community. He used to be a sysop for a lot of the underground BBS networks in the late eighties and early nineties. Now, Moss is part of the Obama administration and is currently the ICANN Chief Security Officer. He's basically responsible for the security of the entire Internet.

In July 2000, Bobby made plans to attend Defcon 8, which was being held at the Alexis Park hotel. He suggested I come out to meet him. I had never seen Vegas, so I booked my plane ticket.

Defcon 8 was only a little different from what I expected. With the dot-com bubble officially bursting earlier that year, there was a general uneasiness everywhere. Many of the attendees had been recently fired from their jobs. A lucky few had struck it rich on stock options before the Dot-Com cookie began to crumble.

One of Bobby's friends seemed to have successfully weathered the storm. He had a limo waiting outside of Alexis Park and invited some hackers to jump in and cruise the Vegas strip. Bobby and I hopped in. The hacker pulled out a ziplock bag from his laptop case containing a dozen joints. He passed one out to each person in the limo. I had never smoked weed before, but this seemed like a good time and place to start.

There's nothing like a first high. As the limo swam through the ocean of neon on the Vegas Strip, the lights seemed to be flying by and standing still at the same time. Everything seemed beautiful.

I convinced the car to keep going down the strip so we could take a look at Binion's Horseshoe. I wanted to go where the World Series of Poker happened. I wanted to see where poker started.

The driver parked the limo next to Binion's and I hopped out of the car, high as the Stratosphere as I walked into the Horseshoe. I found the poker room and watched for a second as a silver-haired dealer named Joe pitched cards in a \$2/4 game.

Then I found the Gallery of Champions, which displayed an 8×10 photo of every WSOP Main Event winner in the history of the game. There they were, all my poker heroes. Doyle Brunson, Amarillo Slim, Stu Ungar, Huck Seed, Johnny Chan, Phil Hellmuth, Scotty Nguyen... they all seemed to be smiling at me.

The newest addition was a framed picture of Chris Ferguson, who had won the event eight weeks prior. He was standing in front of some trees wearing a dark blue suit, light blue shirt, a red tie, and a black cowboy hat. Chris looked happy and content.

I don't remember how long I stood there, staring at that wall. I just remember that by the time I got back into the limo, I had a new goal. I wanted to win the bracelet. I wanted a spot on the wall. I still do.

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At the beginning of August, Bobby and Sami had finished the code allowing us to offer No Limit and Pot Limit Hold'em on Pokerspot, as well as Seven Card Stud, Stud Hi-Low, Omaha and Omaha Hi-Low. We were the only ones in the market to have split pot games, and players started rolling in faster than they had all summer. Bobby said tournaments were right around the corner. He expected them to be ready in early September.

Matt and I scrambled to place new ads into Card Player and Poker Digest announcing the first online poker tournaments. Two weeks after they ran, Paradise began a new ad announcing to the poker world that tournaments were already there.

When we first saw the Paradise ad, my heart sunk. They had beaten us to the punch. They already controlled a huge segment of the market, and this would eliminate any competitive edge we might have been able to hold over them. I signed into my Paradise account to see what we were up against.

It turned out Paradise had been very loose with their definition of "tournaments" in their ad campaign. What they released is known as a sit-n-go. Their tournaments were basically single tables with increasing blinds. There was no multi-table aspect to it. They were advertising something they didn't really have.

It wouldn't matter, though. I have very little doubt that Paradise saw a huge increase in their user signups as a result of the campaign. A casual reader,

picking up a Card Player at his local poker room, would see the ad and assume it meant the kind of multi-table tournaments that drew a flood of players into Vegas every WSOP. On the other hand, the casual Paradise player would see our ad and assume we were running the same lame single-table tournaments that they could just as easily find on Paradise.

Our announcement had been premature. It gave Paradise a window to swoop in and take the steam out of our upcoming feature launch. Another business mistake to add to the list.

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Life Lesson #17
Advertise actions, not intentions.

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There were some bugs. Before we launched the first real money online multi-table tournament, we offered a week of freerolls to the Pokerspot players to beta-test the new feature. The first freeroll tournament crashed our server. Bobby spent that night tracking and fixing the bug in time for the next scheduled freeroll, which seemed to fire off without a hitch. The players were seated correctly, the blinds increased just fine, and the table merging routines triggered perfectly. Then we realized every table was being dealt the exact same hands.

Bobby had spent a lot of time on the random number generation (RNG) aspect of the design after a bunch of white hat hackers had released a white paper at the tail end of 1999 explaining how they had cracked the RNG routines at Planet. They were eventually able to see other players holecards, as well as know what the turn and river would be. It was a big embarrassment for Planet.

The Pokerspot RNG was seeded by commercial hardware in our Costa Rican servers that contained a small amount of radioactive isotopes and would track radioactive decay. Imagine seven radioactive atoms with a half-life of a second.

After the second passes, there will be either three or four radioactive atoms left. We can't know which it will be... just the probabilities.

There are plenty examples of semi-randomness. Things like barometric pressure, the temperature in a room to the hundredth decimal point, the exact number of voters in a presidential election, the flop from a well-shuffled deck... all of these are not truly random, but are guided by processes of such complexity that they might as well be.

Radioactive decay, on the other hand, may well be one of the few things in the universe which is actually random. Or it may be some unknown physical process is determining whether three or four of those radioactive atoms will be left. Whether there is true randomness in the universe or it is fixed on a predestined course has always been a question that gives me pause for thought. Either possibility has powerful implications.

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The tourney RNG problem was a simple bug to fix. The server had been sending tables the same deck and it only took a few lines of code for Bobby to kill the bug. We watched a few more freerolls fire and complete. It was ready.

On a Sunday in September, we launched the Internet's first real-money multi-table online poker tournament. We'd have a monopoly on tournaments for well into the next year.

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My mom and Rich were having marital problems, and it looked like a divorce was inevitable. Instead, my mom found out she was pregnant, and they weathered through their rocky marriage for another ten years. The day after we released poker tournaments, my little brother Austin was born. It was a good week.

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Tournaments were as popular as I thought they would be. We saw a spike in our numbers, a roughly 33% increase in signups and deposits in a matter of weeks. The money started to roll in. Then in October, we suffered our first big business blow. Just when things started to look really promising, the incoming deposits stopped being approved. One moment there was a steady stream of incoming player deposits flowing into the Pokerspot cardroom, the next moment it stopped. Somebody had turned off the money faucet.

Matt and I started to field incoming complaints from players unable to make deposits. We called Bobby, who spent an hour looking through the cashier history and told us it wasn't a problem on our end. EPayment Solutions had stopped approving credit cards.

For the first several hours, Matt and I sat paralyzed in our St. Louis apartment hoping it was a temporary glitch with the EPS servers and that everything would soon resume as normal. We hoped it would be a minor inconvenience costing us a day's worth of deposits. Six hours later the problem remained, and the atmosphere in our living room office grew more tense by the minute.

As soon as the EPS offices opened in Australia, I told Matt to call our account executive named Marcus. I should have been the one to make that phone call. I only heard Matt's half of it, who started the conversation stern and angry. By the end of the call, his tone had changed back to his baseline happy and friendly self.

"Ok great! Thanks Marcus." (laugh). "Ok, you too." (hangs up phone).

"So what's it look like?"

"They're just having a small issue with their bank in Nevis. It looks like things will be back to normal by tomorrow."

Matt seemed satisfied that the problem was solved. He went back to answering emails, assuring players that things were fine, and processing cashouts for the players who were pulling money out of the system. I was skeptical. A little knot started to form in the pit of my stomach.

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Life Lesson #18
Never delegate what you can just as easily do yourself.

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A week later, ePayment Solutions still wasn't processing. Pokerspot still had games running, but as one player would inevitably lose to another, fewer and fewer of them had money to buy in to a game. Without the regular fish, the pros didn't have a reason to stick around. They started to cashout. Deposits are the lifeblood of a cardroom. When you shut off the water, the whole system dries up. Our business was suffocating.

The worst thing, though, was ePayment Solutions had processed a full month's worth of player deposits and the wire containing those deposits was late. It became more apparent every day that the wire wasn't coming, not to mention our entire rolling reserve. EPS owed us over \$80,000. Without the past deposits coming into our bank account, Pokerspot wasn't holding money to cover anywhere close to the amount of chips circulating in the cardroom.

As soon as it became apparent that the ePayment Solutions wire wasn't coming, the correct move should have been to shutdown the site and give players a full explanation of what was going on. *Of course* we should have shut it down.

Instead, we let the games continue. We used the little we had left in our offshore account to process the small cashouts as normal. And we delayed the bigger cashouts as long as we could. Every dollar raked off a table was a dollar we wouldn't be on the hook for later.

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I gave Matt the task of finding another processor so we could get the incoming deposits flowing again. He found one called Net Pro, which was signing up a number of online operators left scrambling after the ePayment Solutions implosion. It was founded by a couple of guys in Florida named Paul Weinstock

and Michael Acierno. Matt and I talked to them on the phone and looked on a few of the forums. It didn't seem like any of the other online bookies and casino operators had any complaints with Net Pro. They looked like our best option.

We were running out of money quickly and needed some breathing room. Besides money to cover the player cashouts, we'd also need more cash to cover the setup costs for Net Pro as well as pay our monthly server bill, not to mention the Card Player and Poker Digest invoices we had been putting off.

I drove to Columbia, MO and sat down with my stepfather Rich. I explained what had happened and convinced him to put in another \$30k to keep Pokerspot from failing. He wrote a check which we overnighted to our bank account. Matt and I executed the new agreement with Net Pro and towards the end of October, we were processing deposits again.

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After the money faucet turned back on, Pokerspot resumed as if nothing had happened. Money poured in as we saw a wave of new players eager to jump into our tournaments. As soon as the first Net Pro wire hit our account in early November, every pending cashout and invoice was paid. It was business as usual.

There was still an \$80,000 hole in our books. By that point, ePayment Solutions had stopped answering the phone and I knew we'd never see that money. Nevertheless, our spirits were high. Pokerspot was raking more chips off the tables every day, and it looked like we'd rake enough to cover the EPS hole by the end of the year.

By the end of November, we stopped having three-figure days and moved into the low thousands. It felt like everyday was Christmas. We were speeding down the road to riches and nobody would ever know about our close brush with disaster.

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Life Lesson #19**Growing too fast is worse than not growing at all.**

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A week after Thanksgiving, there was a big online gaming convention being held in Antigua. Our new processor was going to be one of the conference sponsors, and attending would give us the chance to meet them in person. There was also a sportsbook down there, called CyberSportsbook.com, run by a young Canadian named Ron Tartar (like the sauce). Ron had contacted us because he saw an opportunity in offering poker to his sportsbook players, and he wanted to talk about using our software.

Matt had travelled a lot before law school. He had a goal of visiting every country in the world and was eager to cross Antigua off his list. Even though Pokerspot was an Antiguan corporation, and our games were supposedly running in Costa Rica, I had never set foot off US soil. I expedited my passport.

The island was, and still is, amazingly beautiful. Matt and I rented a car and drove to the Royal Antiguan hotel and casino, where the conference was being held. I stared out the window of our rented SUV as we drove through the Antigua countryside. The roads were lined with hand-built shacks. There was a billboard announcing to the islanders that safe sex prevented pregnancy. Every few miles, Matt would have to dodge an islander walking down the street. One of them was barefoot and shirtless, holding a machete over his shoulder. I thought my family had been poor, but that day I saw what real poverty looked like.

We met with Ron, who gave us the rundown of the island and the industry. All of the sportsbooks were reeling from the same processing issues which had nearly crippled Pokerspot. WSEX, the very first online sportsbook, had been hit the hardest by EPS. But they had been around for awhile and were big enough to survive the blow. Many other online casinos and sportsbooks had been put out of business.

Ron explained how he became an online sportsbook operator. He and his friend Gabe started betting on sports in college. They used a strategy which sounded vaguely like the Martingale system, and eventually found themselves broke. They decided the only way to beat the book was to be the book. So they set up shop.

Ron was friendly and outgoing, but he seemed to be in a bad mood. I dug a little, and it sounded like operating a sportsbook had potential pitfalls that poker sites didn't have to worry about. Bonus hustlers, sharp bettors, line scalpers, processing problems... plus the NFL season was killing him. His partner Gabe set the lines and they would do their best to keep them as even as possible, but often they'd have games where the sides were uneven and they'd be sweating the outcome.

We didn't ink a deal with Ron. He saw poker more as a way of attracting players to a sportsbook than a revenue generator in and of itself. I can't really blame him. Poker was an incredibly small slice of the online gambling industry at the time. When a player can lose a small fortune to a sportsbook on a single game, it doesn't look wise convincing that player to play poker and pay you a few dollars every time they win a hand.

Matt and I met a few of the other players in the online casino space including the partners at Net Pro, who seemed to be doing a lot of business signing up new sites. All in all, though, the conference was largely a waste of money and time. Most business conferences are.



By the new year we had raked ourselves out of our \$80k hole. The Pokerspot traffic had increased quicker than we imagined. We had taken in around \$400k in deposits in the past 30 days, raking off about a third of that. In the first week of 2001, we had four regular tables going around the clock and recorded our best daily rake figure yet... more than \$8,000 in a single day.

Then one day in January, Matt got an email from a customer having issues depositing money. Another soon hit our customer support queue. Then another.

The money faucet had been turned off again.

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“You can’t get fooled again.”

George W. Bush

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Before Net Pro had stopped processing our deposits, we were expecting a \$400,000 wire to hit our account early the next week. Pokerspot had a long cashout queue and didn’t have enough in the bank account to cover all the player checks being requested. If Matt had asked what to do, I am confident I would have told him to delay sending any cashouts until the Net Pro wire hit.

He didn’t ask, and instead called our main contact at Net Pro, Paul Weinstock, who assured him the wire had already been sent. Then Matt processed the cashout checks and sent them out, relying on our Net Pro wire crediting before our players would have a chance to cash them.

Pokerspot had around \$60,000 in our business account when Net Pro stopped processing. Early the next week, when all the players cashed their checks, the Pokerspot account was completely wiped out. Dozens of cashout checks started to bounce, and word spread like wildfire within the online poker community. It also spread on the site itself. The client had a chat windows like every other online cardroom. The players were talking and the message was clear.

Pokerspot was sinking.

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Life Lesson #20

The check is never in the mail.

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The Net Pro disaster was a carbon copy of the ePayment Solutions disaster. Net Pro was tagging gaming transactions as non-gaming transactions and running them through Barclays bank. Eventually the bank caught on and froze their accounts.

I don't believe that Michael Acierno or Paul Weinstock from Net Pro made off into the sunset with the Pokerspot deposits, or that Tony Brown from ePayment Solutions bought a plane with money stolen from WSEX. The processing companies were making a huge amount of profit on every transaction. There was no reason for any of these guys to kill the proverbial cash cow.

Yet all of these men, and their companies, were engaging in fraud. Besides mislabeling the transactions as non-gaming purchases, they allowed their customers to believe their funds were safe and even gave assurances that disbursements were on the way when they weren't. And we, in turn, did the same.

The money went somewhere, and to this day I don't know where it ended up. Maybe it went to a government, as fines for criminal fraud, or perhaps it was recovered by the credit card companies and divided up between depositors. Maybe Tony Brown really did buy a plane. I don't know.

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With exactly zero dollars in the bank, zero deposits coming in, and over a quarter million dollars in chips we couldn't honor, Pokerspot was in very bad shape. I found another new processing company who would process for Pokerspot called Firepay (they'd eventually go down after the UIGEA passed). We somehow got them to waive the startup fee and we turned the cashier's deposit option back on, but by that point Pokerspot was a ghost town. Deposits didn't come in and Firepay would eventually get enough emails from stiffed players to convince them to terminate their services.

It was obvious to everyone our site was dying. The hole was too big.. we wouldn't be able to rake our way out this time. Matt lost his taste for answering

angry customer support emails. In February, he gave me his letter of resignation and joined the Air Force.



Bobby had taken a job at another Silicon Valley networking company called NetVMG. Sami had never quit his full-time job, so he wasn't facing homelessness either. But I was in bad financial straits. Altogether, I had paid myself less than \$1,000/month for the whole year Pokerspot was running. My personal bank account was empty and I had no idea what I was going to do.

Shortly after Matt left Pokerspot, my old law school roommate, Rob, came into town and we had lunch. I told him everything that had happened and surely looked pretty defeated. Rob loaned me a few grand and told me to get back on my feet. I didn't ask for it, and wouldn't have. But he offered and I couldn't say no. It still ranks as one of the nicest things anybody has ever done for me.

I spent the next couple of weeks staring at my computer screen reading angry emails which I had stopped replying to. I read the forums and the dozens of posts from shafted Pokerspot players calling for blood. It felt like things couldn't get much worse.

They did get worse, though. There is always a trapdoor at the bottom of every barrel.



I talked to Bobby regularly, and we both agreed the business still had a good amount of value. Two hundred thousand lines of code had to be worth something. There was the possibility we might be able to get some patent protection on the tournament module we rolled out, which could potentially be worth a fortune. We also owned sixty or so premium poker domain names I had registered the previous year. And even though the site was empty and the Pokerspot brand was all but dead, we still thought it would have value if all the players were paid back.

I spent several weeks sending out emails to everyone I could think of who might be interested in online poker software and the Pokerspot cardroom. I posted on a few online bookie forums. I convinced a few industry sites to send out a notice to their mailing lists. I even turned to the poker newsgroup.

Eventually, we got a few bites. Things looked like they might turn around.

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Selling a company is like selling a car with problems. You'll inevitably have a lot of people come by, kick the tires, and look under the hood. They might even take it for a test drive. A few will try to get you to give them the car and take low monthly payments for the next hundred years. Very few people will actually show up with a checkbook ready to buy your headache.

There were two options which presented themselves.

(Option 1). An investment group from RGP, led by a head shop owner from Florida named Burton. I met with Burton, and he seemed friendly and outgoing. The first thing he told me was that he was a recovering addict with nine years sobriety. He said it with a fluidity that makes me think he started every new relationship with that peculiar declaration.

The group claimed to have raised a few hundred thousand and said they weren't willing to give me and the other shareholders anything, but they were willing to assume the Pokerspot player liabilities in exchange for the Pokerspot assets. I'd be off the hook. The group was serious enough to have a contract drafted and ready to be signed. It sounded shaky to me, though, and I wasn't at all convinced the players would get paid back with this deal.

(Option 2). Poker.com, led by CEO Michael Jackson, who looked as different from the pop singer as you can imagine. Michael was a short, white and very proper South African man

who I liked right away. I travelled to Phoenix to meet with him and attempt to work out a sale.

Poker.com had been running on the ASF software platform which Planet used, and had just IPOed on a Canadian stock exchange for a healthy amount. They were constantly having issues with their software and hoped acquiring Pokerspot would give their company a technical boost. They offered to pay off the Pokerspot players and also give me and the other shareholders \$150,000. I finally felt a sense of relief that the Pokerspot nightmare would be over and all the players would be made good.

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I left the meeting feeling good, telling Michael I'd have to talk to Bobby and the other shareholders about the deal, but was certain I could get it approved. We shook hands and a few days later, he sent me a contract. I sent it over to Bobby, Sami, and Matt to get their feedback. Everyone agreed it was the best option we had.

Right before we sent our acceptance letter to Poker.com, I received an email from a guy in Texas named Monty Kerr. He asked if the Pokerspot software was still on the market and I told him it was, but we were about to sign a deal selling it to Poker.com. He emphatically insisted that we not sign anything until we met with him and heard what he had to say. I was reluctant. The Poker.com deal was all but done. He assured me we'd want to hear his offer. He offered to fly my little brother and me to Vegas the next day to meet him. I packed my bags.

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(Option 3). GoldenPalace.com, the largest online casino at the time, led by Jack Stroll and David Leb. They were the 800 lb. gorilla of online gambling. By most accounts the company

was worth well over \$100 million, with tens of millions in cash reserves. They wanted to take over the online poker market.

Golden Palace had two full software teams, one in Austin and another in Montreal, both working on poker software. They viewed a Pokerspot acquisition as a way to speed up their own development and create a beachhead in the market. They were serious enough to fly us up to Montreal that weekend, right after our initial meeting with Monty, where they offered double the Michael Jackson deal. One million dollars, with half of it being reserved to pay off the Pokerspot players and our initial investor (Rich), and the other half divided among the four shareholders. They also offered to hire Sami, Bobby and me as full-time consultants for two years with good salaries.

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When I returned from Montreal, I called Michael and told him about the Golden Palace deal. He said Poker.com couldn't match it. They just didn't have the resources that Golden Palace had. Michael was disappointed our deal wasn't going to happen, but he told me he understood. We took option 3.

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If I could travel back in time and delete one email, it would be the one I got from Monty Kerr. I wish I never met him.

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The Golden Palace deal turned out to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Bobby, Sami, Matt and I each signed a 30 page contract for the acquisition of PSI Inc. It allowed for \$30,000 upfront to cover moving costs for the three of us who would be relocating to Canada, and the rest would be paid after three months of "due diligence". Jack told us to turn off the servers. Golden Palace arranged for our work visas, and Bobby and I moved up to Montreal where we met Sami, our partner of almost two years, for the first time face to face.

Sami Vaaraniemi was exactly what you would expect a Finnish computer programmer to look like. He was pale and thin with long straight hair. He wore glasses and had a wise look about him, almost like a wizard. He had moved his family to Quebec and was looking forward to the new life.

As soon as we got into town, we transferred all of the Pokerspot domains over to GoldenPalace, with the exception of Pokerspot.com itself, which was set in the contract to be transferred at the end of the three month “due diligence” period.

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Shortly after we started working for Golden Palace, my baby brother Austin had his first birthday in Missouri. It was the same day nineteen true believers of Islam decided to turn four passenger jets into missiles. I remember watching live as the second tower fell. I called my mom, who was crying. She had been decorating a cake for Austin’s birthday party, which was going to be attended by his friends (a handful of other babies and toddlers from her church). This is the world he was born into.

Bobby and I went into work late that day. All of the other people in the office expressed their condolences. They told us they were sorry for our loss.

It did feel like we had lost something.

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That same day, September 11, 2001, PokerStars.com officially launched their site. Their software was beautiful, and blew away every competitor. Eventually, after Paradise would be acquired, Party would leave the US, and Planet would turn into a play-for-free site and be all but forgotten, Stars would emerge as the clear winner in the online poker wars.

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Bobby and Sami spent the next three months going through every line of code and teaching the Golden Palace software team everything they could about online poker software. I spent it with the financial guys working out the Pokerspot repayment details, as well as with the business development guys giving them all of the ideas for future expansion I had for the business. We also started working on the patent process for the tournament module. I convinced the biz dev guys at Golden Palace to give the work to my old law school roommate, Randy, and we flew him up to Montreal for a week to start the application for a provisional patent.

Bobby and I were loving our life in Canada. We'd hang out with some of the Golden Palace coders at nightclubs. One of them was a drug dealer, and I tried ecstasy for the first and only time. He told us drugs were just part of the culture at Golden Palace, and at the last year's company Christmas party, there was a big punch bowl filled to the top with rolled joints of premium BC bud.

Bobby and I each signed a lease on condos in the heart of downtown Montreal, less than a block away from each other. We were both on Peel St., right off St. Catherine. We learned a little French. Drank in dive bars with Bobby's #hack Quebecois connections. Hit up strip clubs with Monty. And worked right there in the Golden Palace offices, Monday through Friday, nine to five.

The women were beautiful. The food was great. Besides the weather, which started turning to shit, I loved everything about Montreal. It still ranks up there as one of my all-time favorite cities.

Everything was going perfectly. It all felt too good be true.

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We spent a lot of time with one of Bobby's Montreal #hack buddies, a kid named Mario, who had one of the craziest random superpowers I've come across. He would close his eyes and we would drop Canadian change on a table. He could tell by the sound what we had dropped.

We'd drop a penny, and he'd tell us a penny. We'd drop a dime, and he'd tell us a dime. We'd drop a toonie, a loonie, a quarter, a nickel, and a penny. He'd tell us \$3.31. It was an unbelievably cool trick, but it wasn't a trick. He could actually listen and distinguish the individual tones. A penny and a dime really do sound distinctly different when they are dropped on a table.

I've always tried to think of a way to turn that skill into money. If Amarillo was alive, he could probably think of something.

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At the end of three months, Bobby and I were pretty close to broke again. We had spent the \$10k advances we had gotten from Golden Palace on setting up our new places and paying off old bills, not to mention living high in Montreal. We weren't too worried about saving anything, because we fully expected to get a big six-figure check the next week before our salaries kicked in.

Instead, the last day of the three months came and we were pulled into the conference room with Sami. They hit us with a brick of bad news. Jack and David were using the "due diligence" clause of our contract to squirm out of our deal. In its place, they offered a different deal.

The new deal was \$250,000 for the shareholders. The two-year consultant gigs would still be part of it, but they cut the salary in half. They wouldn't be paying Rich's initial seed investment back. And there would be no paying the players back.

They had tricked us, plain and simple. We thought they were buying the car, and instead they were looking under the hood. After they went through every line of code, heard everything we had learned and everything we had planned, they had gotten what they needed and were ready to send us packing.

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When we refused the deal, we were escorted out of the building. Monty told us our work visas were going to be cancelled and we wouldn't be able to stay in

Montreal. We didn't even have enough money to book a plane ticket. I asked him what we should do, and he told me we were young and smart and we would eventually bounce back. We would figure something out. My stepfather drove up from Missouri to Montreal to bring my brother and me home.

Sami stayed behind in Montreal. He was offered a different deal. I don't know the details, but I hope they gave him a lot. I understand why he stayed behind. He had left his job and moved to Canada with a wife and baby girl.

I'd later meet several software providers who would tell similar tales of getting fleeced by Jack Stroll and David Leb. Golden Palace still had copies of our software when we left as well as the player records. I have little doubt they put them to good use when they would eventually try and release their own version of online poker.

They stole our software, they stole our developer, they even stole our domain names. I've met a lot of sharks in poker, but none have ever taken as big a bite out of me as the Golden Palace guys.



Back in Missouri, Bobby and I stayed with our parents for a week. We both agreed we had to get out of there as fast as possible. I had some money on Paradise and cashed out all but one hundred, then we eBayed some old Magic the Gathering cards and a collection of Middle Earth Role Playing books. We took the money and set ourselves up in a cheap apartment in Columbia, MO.

I called Michael Jackson to see if the Poker.com deal might still be on the table, but they had gone in a different direction. I even contacted the investment group who wasn't offering anything to us. Even that ship had sailed. Out of options, I fired up Paradise and spent a week at the tables running the last hundred I had left in there up to two grand. It gave me a little breathing room, but the stress of Pokerspot failing had taken its toll.

I started going crazy.

CHAPTER SIX

Racing Thoughts and the Bicycle Joint

**“Some people never go crazy.
What truly horrible lives they must lead.”**

Charles Bukowski

Something happened in my brain. At the beginning of 2002, I'd go through what would be diagnosed as a manic episode with psychotic features, a symptom of bipolar I disorder. It would be the first of a dozen episodes over the next six years. It's hard to explain what a manic episode is like to someone who hasn't gone through one, or at least seen one firsthand. But I'll try.

The first thing that starts happening when you are going manic is you start to get filled with “racing thoughts.” Your brain is flooded with ideas. You become euphoric and filled with energy, bursting with creativity. You feel like you can do anything. You begin to feel invincible and everything around you seems interesting and wonderful. Songs sound better, food tastes better, people look more attractive. There is an incredibly strong sense of connectedness to everything and you begin seeing significance in random occurrences.

This first stage of mania is called the hypomanic stage, and feels very similar to the cerebral high you get after smoking a really good joint of a sativa strain of weed. The whole world feels like its opening up to you. It's a very pleasant feeling, and if a Mexican drug cartel ever figured out how to bottle up hypomania, it would be the biggest drug on the streets. Sometimes this hypomanic state wears off, and you go back to your normal state of mind. Sometimes it doesn't.

When hypomania gives way to full-blown mania, you start to become more and more disconnected with reality. You start to believe you have special

connections with strangers, you start to hear words differently, numbers start having special significance to you, you start to notice subtexts in conversations which aren't really there. You see patterns in everything. Conversations you have seem to go several layers deep. You think you are the first person to have it *all* figured out.

Usually what also happens is you stop sleeping. As six hours a night turns into two hours turns into not sleeping at all, psychosis can set in pretty quickly. You start having "delusions of grandeur," pursuing some world-changing idea that doesn't make sense to anyone around you, and wouldn't make sense to you either if you weren't slipping into crazyland.

Money stops holding any significance. You might give away every dollar you have to a random homeless guy, or bet it all on a spin of roulette. You start to experience "hypersexuality," which basically is the scientific way of saying that you feel like the sexiest fucker that's ever lived.

Celebrities start getting caught up into it. You might start thinking James Cameron or Madonna is sending you telepathic messages. You might start thinking Bill Gates is going to give you a billion dollars to buy an island, where you'll host a big party, and every Oscar winner, Grammy winner, and Nobel prize winner will show up, and you'll reveal some nonsense formula that will completely change the world.

Religion starts to get caught up into it, too. You might start thinking you are Jesus himself, come back to save the world, and start booking flights to recruit your twelve apostles.

After four or five days of no sleep, you start having hallucinations. That's when the magic really starts to happen. The DJ on the radio starts talking to you by name. The late night talk show host comments on the outfit you are wearing. Halos start appearing around the heads of the baristas at Starbucks. Lights start flickering and you might start seeing demons in the shadows.

When psychosis sets in stronger, it can turn dark and get a little scary. You might start getting paranoid, feeling like a three letter government agency is watching

your every move. You might start thinking the Illuminati is testing you, and watching your every move. You might start thinking aliens are communicating with you, and watching your every move. Whoever it is, you are pretty certain they are watching you all the time.

People who care about you will try to keep you from making an ass out of yourself, but it just feels like they are holding you back and keeping you trapped in a corner. You can't stop talking. You start getting irritable, very easily agitated, and even sometimes hostile. You might lash out at them, blow up and suddenly start screaming and cursing at them, or worse you might get physical. At some point, you become a real danger to yourself and those around you.

After weeks of this, you will eventually come down from the mania and start sleeping again, crashing like a modern Rip Van Winkle. More often than not, you'll be coming down in a mental hospital, if you are lucky, or a jail cell if you aren't.



During my first manic episode, I took a Sharpie to every wall in my house, scribbling random notes and equations that didn't mean shit, but seemed profound to me at the time. I was convinced I had discovered the unified field theory of everything. I thought I had proven that the universe would eventually stop expanding and would collapse in on itself, which is an actual theory in cosmology that I didn't know about at the time called "Big Crunch." I had figured out after the universe collapsed, there would be another "Big Bang" and the whole universe would repeat itself again. It had already repeated itself an infinite number of times, and I'd already figured this out over and over before. The whole process would keep going like this forever, each expansion and contraction like a universal heartbeat.

I was also pretty sure that Katie Holmes and I were in love.



Bobby wasn't around when I started going through my first episode. He had gone to St. Louis to visit some of his buddies. He probably started getting annoyed by my constant talking early in the manic phase and decided to get out of town. So I went over to my parents' house to tell my mom the good news.

Mom was used to me getting excited over some idea or thought, but after two minutes of rambling, she realized this was different. She was worried. When she didn't seem as excited as I was about my discoveries, I got a little agitated. I insisted she come see the formulas I had written on the walls. When she walked in, she saw I had completely wrecked the house. She saw the crazy scribbling on every wall.

The first time you see a family member going through a manic episode, you don't know it's a temporary change. My mom started to blame herself, thinking she had pushed me too hard and it was finally catching up to her. She thought my mind had snapped and she'd never have her son back.

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“One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important.”

Bertrand Russell

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It's no easy task to talk someone who is manic into a mental hospital, but my mom managed it. I think she convinced me entering the hospital was some sort of game, some sort of necessary step on a mystical journey. You can't reason with insanity.

When I was admitted, they strapped my arms and legs down to a hospital bed. Four-point restraints. Then they shot me full of drugs. I laid alone in a room for several hours staring at the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. My nose itched and I couldn't scratch it. There is nothing like having it taken away that makes you value your freedom.

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The next day, I met with a psychiatrist for about ten minutes. She pulled out a thick book called the DSM-IV. She then looked through the book and gave me a label: “bipolar I.” The psychiatrist explained that it used to be called “manic depression” and she called it “the Cadillac of mental disease” because many of the symptoms are pleasant to experience and there is a link between intelligence and bipolar. I instantly thought back to Brunson’s *Super/System*, where he called No-Limit Hold’em the “Cadillac” of poker. I’ve always thought it was a funny way of describing a mental illness.

The psychiatrist told me there wasn’t a cure... only treatments. She prescribed a pharmaceutical cocktail (Depakote, Risperdol, Zyprexa) and told me that unless I stuck with my drug regime, I’d likely slip in and out of mania and mental hospitals for the rest of my life.

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While I have no doubt mental health professionals are sincere in their desire to help people, I think the whole field is basically witchcraft where doctors prescribe “potions” with little idea how they actually work. Many of the most common drugs in the mental health world started out as a treatment for something else, preventing seizures for example, and ended up as a staple on the prescription list for certain mental disorders.

The whole mental health economy is fueled by pharmaceutical companies who send out an army of drug reps, some 80,000 men and women, whose job is to bribe medical professionals with free lunches, classes, and office supplies in order to increase prescriptions.

It costs a considerable amount of money in research and development to get a drug to market. Big Pharma has a strong financial motivation to focus efforts on ongoing treatment rather than providing actual cures for disease. Pharmaceutical companies are not charities, and are looking for every way to increase their quarterly reports. The conflict of interest this creates should be obvious.

In just the last four years, both Abbot Laboratories, which manufactures Depakote, and Eli Lilly, which manufactures Zyprexa, were both at the wrong end of billion dollar settlements for promoting off-label use of those particular drugs. More recently, Johnson and Johnson was hit with close to \$4 billion in judgments and penalties for illegally marketing Risperdol as well as downplaying side-effects... including a tendency for male patients taking the designer drug to grow breasts.

Incidentally, each of these three drugs was part of my first bipolar cocktail.

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The Top Five Portrayals of Bipolar Disorder in Film and Television

#1. Tom Wilkinson as Arthur Edens. *Michael Clayton* (2007).

Wilkinson plays a senior litigation partner in a powerful New York law firm who suffers from bipolar disorder. He goes off his meds during a big case against a Monsanto-like big agriculture company. There are several scenes in the movie which really nails what bipolar is like, such as the deposition scene where Arthur Edens strips down naked and the jail scene where Wilkinson tries to explain away his madness to the main character. There's also a poker scene, where George Clooney is playing in an underground NYC game, which feels authentic.

#2. Claire Danes as Carrie Matthison. *Homeland* (TV, 2011).

The last few episodes of the first season of *Homeland* were a bit uncomfortable for me to watch because Danes' portrayal of mania was so dead-on accurate. She gets the crazy so well. Her movements and speech patterns were entirely convincing, and did a better job displaying what a manic episode actually looks like than any other television show or movie I've seen.

#3. Bradley Cooper as Pat Solatano. *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012).

Cooper plays a character who is diagnosed with bipolar. There are a few scenes where he is excitedly going off about a book he's reading in his parents bedroom at 4am, which is something I could see happening during an episode. Cooper

doesn't quite capture the crazy. What he does capture is the loss of confidence and the feeling of being "damaged goods" after his release from a hospital. The scene where Cooper drives home with his mother was like watching a replay of my own life. There are also a few scenes where he's comparing his medication list with Jennifer Lawrence, which was a good portrayal of the insta-bond two people who have gone through the mental health circus can feel. There was also some sports betting in this movie, and Robert DeNiro as a superstitious gambler was pretty fun to watch.

#4. Richard Gere as Mr. Jones. *Mr. Jones (1993)*. Richard Gere plays a man suffering from bipolar fairly well. While the movie doesn't quite get the mechanics of mania as well as *Homeland* or *Michael Clayton*, it does a great job at capturing the euphoria of manic episodes and the stark contrast which comes with commitment. Another part of this movie they showed very well is when a random stranger, played by Delroy Lindo, recognizes something is wrong and tries to help Richard Gere. The movie was written and directed by Eric Roth, who would eventually go on to write the poker movie *Lucky You*.

#5. Russell Crowe as John Forbes Nash. *A Beautiful Mind (2001)*. Russell Crowe did a great job with mental illness in his portrayal of one of the fathers of game theory, John Nash. While Nash is probably more of a schizophrenic than a manic, many of the psychotic elements of his illness are present in bipolar. He has said in interviews that he doesn't see a categorical difference between bipolar and schizophrenia, and I'm inclined to agree. The paranoid feelings Crowe conveyed in the film, as well as the psychotic scribblings and the delusions of grandeur Nash experienced, seeing signs as divine confirmation and having the feeling he was a messenger with unseen supporters and hidden scheming opponents, was all too recognizable.



My first stint as a mental patient lasted three weeks. While I was in there, I made a joke about escaping. Bobby and Mom came to visit, and I light-heartedly borrowed my brother's visitors badge and walked towards the locked entrance, pointing to the badge and indicating to the floor staff she should let me out. I thought it was funny, and so did Bobby. The staff worker didn't see

the humor in it, and wrote something in her log. The next day, I was deemed a flight risk and wasn't allowed to go outside for the rest of my stay. It's a horribly claustrophobic feeling not being able to see the sky.

The problem with medications are the side-effects. Brain chemistry is not an exact science, and every potion in the bipolar cocktail has drawbacks. Some are just minor annoyances, like constant dry-mouth, bad dreams, and weight gain. Some of them are more severe, like the constant dullness of your senses and a heady feeling of thick stupidity.

A few of the side-effects can be permanent, and potentially even more debilitating than the illness they are trying to treat, like kidney or liver failure. One of the other patients I met that first time was an older woman named Denise. She would constantly click her teeth and swish her tongue around the inside and outside her mouth. I thought it was some kind of nervous condition, but it turned out it was a permanent side-effect from one of the bipolar meds she had taken in the past. It was the same bipolar med they had shot me full of the first night I was admitted. Haldol had fried her brain.

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Life Lesson #21

Never tell a joke to a mental health professional.

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I remember reading Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and I later saw the movie starring Jack Nicholson, who portrays a prisoner named McMurphy trying to avoid hard labor by claiming insanity. He ends up getting lobotomized.

It sounds over-the-top unbelievable that psychiatrists and psychologists would spend a decade or more in a university and come out thinking a good way to fix mental illness (and back then, homosexuality) was to ram a needle into someone's brain and scrape around their prefrontal lobe.

But it happened... *a lot*. More than 40,000 patients were lobotomized here in the United States, with just as many procedures happening in Europe. In the 50s and 60s, with the rise of antipsychotic drugs, and the invention of the first pharmaceutical rep, the practice declined and eventually ceased altogether. It's been replaced by chemical lobotomies.



I was released by the mental hospital and given a few weeks supply of my bipolar cocktail. They told me once again bipolar disorder would never go away, and if I didn't take my meds I should expect to end up right back in those four-point restraints.

Bobby had left town. He made a few phone calls and got a job on the east coast as a sales rep for Juniper. When I got out, I didn't have a home to go back to. My old landlord had popped into the house and didn't appreciate my redecorating job. So I stayed with my parents for awhile. This was humiliating. I was 21 years old and living with my mother.

One of my classmates from law school, Mark, had a few rentals in Columbia. I rented a studio apartment for a month in the downtown area, which still ranks as the diviest place I ever lived. As soon as I was on my own, I stopped taking the meds. It didn't take long before the mania returned.

I was watching television one late night when a commercial came on for Zatarain's dirty rice. It had a jazz song in the background. Suddenly, Louis Armstrong was there on the television. He started talking directly to me. "What are you doing in that shithole, Russ?"

Directly to me.

"Come on out to New Orleans!"



Life Lesson #22**Of all the places to go crazy, New Orleans is the best.**

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I took a Greyhound to Louisiana a week before Mardi Gras. My buddy Taylor had moved down there and was working at a coffee shop. He said I could stay with him until I found my own place.

Every year in New Orleans, the whole city erupts in what might be thought of as a communal manic episode. By the time the parades started, I was completely batshit crazy. But in a city where girls expose their breasts to random strangers holding video cameras for plastic beads, my own erratic behavior didn't so much as raise an eyebrow.

I walked down Bourbon Street looking for a divine book of life where I was supposed to write my name. I walked around the French Quarter looking for the devil, who I was supposed to play a headsup poker match with. I was dressed in a suit and tie, and walking around the city with a briefcase full of prescription drugs I wasn't taking, a deck of playing cards, and a lot of random stupid "treasure." I even tried my hand at fortune telling on Jackson Square, and got roughed up a bit by a meth addict who stole a leather coat my mom had given me for Christmas the previous year.

It wasn't until I felt directed to hop into a parked Ford Mustang that my Mardi Gras party would end, that the guiding music would come to an abrupt stop. I was under some delusion that I was going on an important journey, and the yellow Mustang parked in front of the New Orleans federal building was my personal chariot sent by God. It was unlocked, and I called out to a random homeless person to hop into the passenger seat, which he did. Of course, I didn't know how to hot-wire a car, so I just sat there behind the wheel waiting for it to start on its own.

The sports car turned out to belong to an off-duty federal agent. He rushed out of the building, pulled me out of his car, and beat the living shit out of me. I

dodged his blows as best I could, the whole time shouting out a constant stream of Eminem lyrics.

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Right about the time when Nicholas Cage was revealing himself as King Bacchus to the 2002 Mardi Gras celebration, I was in the back of my parents van headed back for another stay at the Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center. The New Orleans Police Department had been very quick in determining I was mentally ill, so rather than send me to jail they sent me to a mental hospital, which was equally quick in spotting a manic episode. They didn't keep me long... shot me full of Haldol and the next day I was on the streets again, dazed and drugged and settled a bit but still rapid cycling as fast as a bicycle messenger.

I had told Taylor what happened, who called my mother. Mom left my one and a half year old brother in Missouri and made the long drive to Louisiana to reclaim her oldest son.

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I'd spend the rest of February and the first part of March in the hospital again. Almost four weeks of my life wasted in the C-block at Mid-Mo. At least this time, I didn't make any bad jokes about trying to fly the coop. I got to go outside and see the sun a few times a day. When I was finally released, my brain had somewhat adjusted to the bipolar cocktail, and I didn't feel quite as thick as I had the time before. But the side-effects were still pretty bad. I was lethargic, sleeping at least ten hours a day. I had also started to put on some weight.

For the sake of my mother, though, I stayed compliant on the meds for awhile. When I complained to her one day about the drug haze, and how much I hated the way they made me feel, she said something which has stuck with me.

"You don't take the meds for yourself. You take them for the people around you."

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I spent the rest of Spring 2002 grinding away at the online poker tables. There were some new sites now, besides just Planet and Paradise. Both PartyPoker.com and PokerStars.com had entered the market with superior platforms than the industry had seen before. Stars was especially polished, and had great tournament software, but Party seemed to be taking the majority of the market share due to a super aggressive affiliate strategy.

I couldn't help but be reminded about Pokerspot and how close we had gotten to pulling it off. I hadn't completely given up hope I might still be able to find a way to turn it around and I was still sending the occasional email to see if I could interest someone in restarting Pokerspot.

It definitely stung a bit, grinding away in those online Hold'em games. But the sting was softened by the several hundred dollars I'd consistently pull off the tables. By the middle of April, I had grinded up \$5,000. The online poker world was buzzing about the WSOP starting up next week. I cashed out the bulk of my online bankrolls and booked a Greyhound ticket to Vegas. I was 21 and finally legal, ready to take my first shot at WSOP gold.

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Traveling by Greyhound bus is a horrible experience, and one I'd recommend everyone avoid. I rolled into Vegas after a 30 hour bus ride. The Vegas Greyhound station is conveniently located right next to the Plaza Hotel, a block away from Binion's Horseshoe.

I was exhausted, stinking of bus grime, and certainly in no condition to play. But I walked right into the Horseshoe and sat down at an open \$20/40 table.

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My first session in Vegas didn't go well. I lost a quick \$500 before deciding I had better call it quits and get some sleep. Rooms at the Horseshoe were pretty cheap back then, costing less than \$40/night. But I was trying to turn

a bankroll into five digits and saw every dollar I spent as dragging me further from my goal.

I took a city bus, the Deuce, from Fremont down Las Vegas Boulevard, looking for cheaper options. There was a hostel which advertised beds for only \$11/night. The place is called Hostel Cat now, but back then was called something else. I pulled the cord on the bus and got off, walked a block, checked into the place and got my room key.

When I got into the room, I saw it had four beds, two of which were being used. One of my hostel mates was an older Vegas local who was going through a divorce. The other was a young Mexican teenager who spoke very little English.

I made my introductions, threw my single duffel bag into the footlocker, and slept through the noise of the city for what seemed like forever.

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Life Lesson #23

There is no sleep so deep as one after a gambling loss.

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I woke up in my Las Vegas hostel, the lights of the strip shining through the desert night. It must have been three in the morning. I didn't waste time. After a quick shower, I caught The Deuce and headed back to Binion's. The cardroom was near empty, with only three cash games going.

I'd find out later the real action was happening upstairs on the second floor in Benny's Bullpen, but at the time I thought these were my only options and I tried to make the best of it. Now, during every summer at the Series, I pass by the main Rio cardroom by the buffet and wonder if any of the players there are disappointed at the game selection at the WSOP, unaware of the massive action going on in the four conference centers on the other side of the casino.

I sat down at a \$10/20 Limit game next to an older Texas player. After a few hands, we struck up the first of what would be quite a few conversations that summer. He introduced himself as Johnny Hughes, and I introduced myself as Russ Boyd. But Johnny's hearing wasn't so great.

"Well, nice to meet you, Dutch. Boyd, huh? One of the first men who ever gave me a job was named Boyd. You ever hear of Bill Boyd, Dutch?"

I started to correct Johnny, letting him know he heard my name wrong. But something about the name sounded right. Dutch Boyd. Every poker player needs a nickname, and "Dutch" certainly sounded better than "Right off the bus Russ." I didn't correct Johnny.

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**"You're not allowed to give yourself a nickname. This holds true
in life as well as in poker."**

Richard Roeper

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Looking back on it, I can't help but think my new name "Dutch Boyd" sounded right because of the National Paint Company. In 1914, a pediatrician at Baltimore's John Hopkins hospital named Kenneth Blackfan published a paper detailing the case of a baby dying of lead poisoning after he had ingested paint chips from his crib. It was soon discovered that lead paint was causing all sorts of problems, and most other countries banned the use of white lead interior paint by 1922.

The National Paint Company, whose paint was 91% lead, reacted to the public relations disaster by rebranding and pouring a tremendous amount of money into the fun new brand: Dutch Boy Paint. It was a tremendously successful effort, and lead poisoning would largely be swept under the rug in the US for another 50 years, until legislation was finally passed in 1971 phasing out interior lead paint.



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Mr. Johnny Hughes turned out to be Dr. Johnny Hughes. He was a semi-retired professor in Lubbock, TX. Johnny called over one of the floormen at Binion's and scored us a couple of comps. We went downstairs to Binion's Original Coffeshop, which was actually a cafe, and ordered breakfast.

Johnny claimed to have been a road gambler back in the 60s. He had a wealth of stories. Johnny talked about shootouts in home games and rounding in West Texas with Doyle Brunson, Amarillo Sim, Titanic Thompson... all the old legends of the game. I couldn't shake the feeling the man was feeding me lies, which I was eating up quicker than the steak and eggs, but the next day I saw him chumming it up with Doyle and realized all his stories were true.

Johnny Hughes became my first poker mentor. We didn't talk a lot of strategy, but I'd watch him play and absorbed some of his style. Mostly, Johnny would tell me stories about what poker had been like when he was grinding a living at the tables. He told me how different poker was today from how it was played in the 50s, 60s, and 70s.

The game had cleaned up. It used to be cheating was part of the game, and the old Texas road gamblers would give a signal when they first sat down at a table if they would be fleecing the sheep. They'd put their left hand, palm down, flat on the table. If another sharp player saw this, he'd make what Johnny called "the Texas cough," which would be his signal back that the two would be splitting up the night's take outside in the parking lot after the dealing was done.

Johnny told me the first cardroom in Vegas was started by a guy named Bill Boyd in the 40s. After the Golden Nugget was built, Bill Boyd rented a section of the casino floor and opened the first legal poker room in Vegas. In 1961, Hughes had followed the other Texas road gamblers out west, and Benny Binion himself had sent him over to Boyd for a job. Johnny was hired as a shill for the Nugget's \$6 Limit Razz game.

Johnny Hughes played Razz on house money for eight hours a day, with Bill Boyd regularly sitting behind him and teaching him about the game. Boyd is widely considered one of the best stud players to have ever lived, having won four WSOP bracelets in stud. Bill Boyd won the Five Card Stud event at the WSOP four years in a row, until they did away with the event after nobody would sign up.

Under Boyd's coaching, Hughes became pretty good and began booking fairly big wins for Boyd, who paid him a single silver dollar an hour, \$8 a day.

Johnny must have grown tired of the degenerate nature of poker in his youth, because he eventually headed back to Texas and went back to school. He'd do something noble with his life, first teaching high school then college.

There in Vegas, Johnny was all about the money at the tables. He didn't play for glory or fun. He wasn't seeking a challenge. Johnny was always just looking for the easiest game he could find where he could pad his bankroll a bit. One vivid memory was during the next week, when players started lining up through the cash game area downstairs to sign up for a mega-satellite into the WSOP Main Event.

He pointed to the line.

“Look at ‘em, Dutch. All those guys, chasing a dream they’ll never catch. Bunch of gloryhounds, the whole lot of ‘em. There’s no money in tournaments. Only disappointment.

“Take it from me. If you want to make a living playing poker, stick with the cash games.”



My race to \$10,000 wasn’t going so well. I had been in town for a week and was quickly losing hope that I’d win enough for the Main Event buy-in. Upstairs in Benny’s Bullpen, two relatively unknown poker players, Phil Ivey and Layne Flack, had each won their second bracelets. Layne would win his third later that Series, and Ivey would take a third and fourth. It would launch them both to superstar status in the poker world.

Upstairs, legends of the game were establishing themselves in the books. Johnny Chan, Mike Matusow, Jennifer Harman, John Hennigan, Miami John Cernuto, Thor Hansen, John Juanda, Allen Cunningham... all of them won a bracelet that year. Upstairs, history was being made.

Downstairs, I was slowly drowning in the \$20/40 Limit Hold’em game.



My live bankroll was still above \$3,000 when I met Phil Laak. He took a seat next to me in the \$20/40, wearing a thick light grey hoodie and sunglasses. His hair had blonde highlights and he had the look of a California surfer kid. He spoke with just the smallest hint of an accent hard to place. Phil carried himself with the same “joker of poker” style which would eventually bring the highest fame-to-earnings ratio of any poker player with a Y chromosome. He seemed to be killing the games. I took to Phil right away.

A small camera crew came by the table. A young LA brunette named Rebekah Sindoris was filming for an independent documentary and had gotten permission from Binion's to walk the floor of the casino. Along with her was a twenty-something kid holding a large video camera. Rebekah waved at Phil, who got up from the table and chatted with her for a few minutes. Then he waved me over and introduced me to the pair.

Rebekah introduced herself, and so did her cameraman, David Smythe. Rebekah explained she was filming a documentary about poker players called *Beyond the Felt*. She explained she and David, who she called "Dorf", had been getting interviews with all the top players in the game, as well as a few that she considered "rising stars" like Phil and his roommate Antonio. Rebekah asked if I wouldn't mind sitting down with her for one. I told her I would be happy to do it.

I'd do the interview, my first one as a poker player, and Rebekah would eventually become a pretty close friend. Dorf would become part of The Crew.

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Life Lesson #24
Never turn away from the camera.

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When Phil Laak left his \$20/40 seat, there was a dealer in the game named Terry who started going off on Phil. Terry was from New York and dealt at a few of the underground clubs. He had been dealing at the Diamond Club for years and was going to be dealing at Playstation after the Series was over.

It turned out Phil was a regular in those New York clubs. He had started his gambling career as a backgammon player. In the 90s, backgammon had started to die off. Computer science killed it.

Backgammon, like poker, has long been a favorite of the Artificial Intelligence field. In 1979, a computer program called BKG 9.8 by Hans Berliner soundly

defeated the world's greatest backgammon player at the time, Luigi Villa. Work in AI would continue through the 80s under IBM, under a project called TD-Gammon. The new approach started using genetic algorithms and became stronger than the best human players. But there was still plenty of gambling going on over backgammon boards.

Finally in the 90s, commercial software programs were released which started to really kill the backgammon gambling action. These new backgammon programs, Jellyfish and later Snowie, were not only strong opponents, but could be used as trainers, telling former fish where they were making mistakes. Laak explained to me that guys who had been donating to the backgammon world for decades would suddenly start using these programs and reach a world-class level in a matter of six months.

Backgammon basically turned into chess. Weaker players could no longer hold onto the illusion they were better than the opponent who had just cleaned them out. Jellyfish and Snowie would tell them exactly where they went wrong and exactly how much better their opponent was than they were. All mystery was taken out of the game. And when word got out that backgammon was a problem which had been solved, the action dried up.

As a result, some of the backgammon players started looking for other ways to make money gambling and they naturally flocked to poker. Guys like Dan Harrington and Gus Hansen, along with Phil Laak, are examples of backgammon players who made the move from dice to cards.

But back to Terry. "You'll want to stay away from that guy, Dutch. I know him from New York. He's a scumbag."

I raised my eyebrows. "What do you know?"

"The guy used to play all the time at the club I dealt at. One night he broke into the place and stole seventy grand right out of the safe. They got the whole thing on camera. The guy's a thief. Everybody up there knows it.

“Besides that, he’s a cheapskate. Did you see him stiff me when I pushed him that \$500 pot?”

This last part is true. Phil, at least back then, was easily one of the cheapest people I’ve known. He broke down his \$1 chips into quarters, and would make liberal use of silver when toking the dealers. The rest of the accusations didn’t ring true to me. Generally when someone is caught on camera committing grand larceny, they end up behind bars... not mixing it up at poker tables in Vegas.

So I doubted Terry. His story didn’t make me want to avoid Laak at all. It only piqued my interest.



By the time I ran into Phil again, my bankroll had dropped another grand. The games were tough, and I really had no idea what I was doing. Playing online had gotten me used to a low level of competition compared to the hometown heroes who came out to Vegas for the Series before ESPN and the poker boom. I was outclassed and my goal of reaching \$10k before the Main Event looked less likely by the hand. I’m sure it showed all over my face.

Phil suggested we grab a bite to eat at a Subway near Binion’s. We walked down Fremont Street in the middle of the day, talking about poker and our aspirations of making it big. Phil was a riot. He analyzed every life decision in terms of expected value and talked about things differently than I’d ever heard someone talk. He was unlike anybody I’d ever met before or since. A true original.

When we got to the sub shop, I ordered a footlong and a soda. Laak ordered a footlong and a water, and filled the tiny complimentary cup with soda just the same. Just ten minutes before, he had been playing in high stakes games where a decent pot would be more than a sandwich artist’s monthly wages. Now he was in a fast-food restaurant, skimping on two bucks for a Sprite.

I joked around with him about it, thinking it was a bit odd, but he was unapologetic and even proud of the act. He went for the refill and gave the counter employee a little nod as he was doing it. The employee just gave a smirk. He wasn't paid enough to care.

Phil was battling the system. A freedom fighter. Che Guevara in a sandwich shop.

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As he wrapped up half of his footlong for later, Phil asked whether I'd be playing the Main Event. I confessed to him, and for the first time to myself, that I probably wouldn't be.

I knew enough about bankroll management and stuff like the Kelly Criterion to know the meager bankroll I had come to Vegas with wasn't even sufficient to buy into a \$6/12 Limit game, let alone the \$20/40 I had been taking shots in. I was down to a little under \$2,000 and decided to step it down a notch. Even that wouldn't really give me much of a shot to survive out here in Vegas.

Phil must have seen I needed cheering up. He asked if I smoked weed. I hadn't turned down a chance to toké up since the first magic experience two years prior. So I jumped at the chance to take my mind off the bad beats.

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Phil was staying at Binion's, so we headed up to his room. He pulled out a ziplock with about a quarter ounce of beautiful buds and a one-hitter that we passed back and forth a couple of times. I asked Phil about the safecracking heist Terry had talked about downstairs on the casino floor, and Laak filled me in on his side of the story. Yes, a cardroom had been robbed but he hadn't done it (and there was no video showing otherwise).

Phil seemed distressed about the reputation hit he had unfairly taken. I sympathized. I told him about my own history with Pokerspot, and how my own reputation had taken a fairly big dip after hundreds of online players

assumed I had simply stolen a quarter million dollars and drove off into the sunset. We talked a bit about online poker, and then about the life EV of other random things.

We were just starting another zany half-baked conversation when the door flew open. In flew a 23-yr old Persian named Antonio.

This was Antonio Esfandiari, known as “The Magician” for his handful of gigs as a working closeup artist in some San Jose restaurants before making the transition to poker. Today, Esfandiari is the leading all-time money winner at the WSOP, with three bracelets and \$23 million in tournament earnings. Sick.

But it was 2002, and I didn’t know who he was. All I saw was a super-confident, energetic and brash poker player with a mysterious look to him. Phil introduced us and Antonio gave me a nod. Phil offered Antonio the one-hitter, but The Magician just scowled at his friend. Then Antonio sat down at the table next to Phil, grabbed his sack of weed, poured the buds out onto the table and pulled a rolling paper out of his pocket. He started telling a bad beat story as he broke up the herb.

“So you’ll never believe what happened downstairs, Phil. I had aces in the small blind, and Camel-hair raises, makes it seventy to go...”

I had only been in Vegas for a week or so, but had already heard enough bad beats to know where this one would go. They all are pretty much the same. So I tuned Antonio out while I sunk into my weed zone high and watched the magician quickly and efficiently roll the most perfect joint I had ever seen. He even pulled a deck of playing cards out of his pocket, ripped a quarter inch off the side of a joker, and rolled the torn part into the joint as a makeshift filter.

The resulting creation looked like it could have been a co-branding effort by Camel and Bicycle. He stopped with his bad beat story as he took a long drag and held it in like a pro. He made it look effortless. It would take me five years of constant practice before I’d be able to smoke weed like that. As he exhaled, he passed the joint to Phil and continued with the bad beat story.

“...and it goes call, call. And then the donkey just shoves all-in for like \$5k!”

He had a big smile on his face and I realized I was mistaken. He wasn't telling a bad beat story after all. Antonio was a winner and was telling us about a win.

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They talked the same. The pair had been hanging out long enough for their speech patterns to rub off on each other. They used the same poker slang, which was like a bastardized version of East Coast meets West Coast jargon. The first time I heard the term “donkey” was there in that hotel room. Phil had to explain to me what it meant. He said it's what they called the bad players out east. Before then, I'd call them “fish,” but after that, “donkey” was the only word to use.

Besides their passion for poker and winning, Phil and Antonio couldn't have been more different. Antonio was brash and personable, outgoing and calm, a master showman when being watched but almost introverted otherwise, and a great situational reader. Antonio had little to no respect for money, and would throw it around like he had a Benjamins tree in his backyard. His detachment for the fortunes he plays over is one of the qualities which has made him so successful in poker, and one of many things I'd come to admire about him.

Phil, on the other hand, while still always likable, had an erratically sharp analytical side. He was looking at the angles, and as a former trader in New York, he understood there was a mathematical nature to almost everything in life. Phil always had a great way of breaking that nature down from an abstract level to a practical one.

Like the best business partners, one's weakness was the other's strength. I don't think the poker world has ever seen a better pair.

As Antonio was leaving the room, Phil began to collect every tiny crumb of marijuana on the table by licking his forefinger and getting the tiniest fragments to stick, which he'd then return to the ziplock. Antonio scowled.

“Why do you have to be such a budget-boy all the time, Phil? Just brush it off! Every second you waste doing that you could be killing it downstairs at the tables.”

Phil laughed and said, “Do you realize the price of gold per ounce is \$300? And the price for an ounce of herb is \$300? This weed is the exact same price as gold! If these were little flakes of gold all over the table, you wouldn’t just wipe them off to get vacuumed by housekeeping.”

It was always hard to argue with Phil’s logic.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Indian Rope Trick

“We are what we pretend to be.”

Kurt Vonnegut

Poker is not a team sport. It never has been, probably never will be. Usually, the best poker player at any given table is also the most selfish. Berry Greenstein made this point well in his book *Ace on the River*. He listed 25 traits of top poker players, which included “self-centered”, “insensitive”, and “greedy”. He stated what I think is one of the sad truths about the game of poker when he wrote a good player is empathetic but not sympathetic. It’s not that top pros don’t think about the other players at the table, or don’t understand what the other players are going through. The best poker players do both of these things. They just don’t care.

Until I saw the interactions between Antonio and Phil, I didn’t really think about allies and partners in the poker world. I hadn’t thought a group of players might together be more than the sum of their parts. A seed had been planted, and it would grow for more than a year.

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I was running out of money when Phil helped me out. He wanted to try playing online more and had agreed to buy the rest of my PokerStars bankroll at ninety five cents on the dollar. It was \$1,100 worth and would give me a little breathing room out here in Vegas, as well as keep me from having to wait two or three weeks for the cashout check to come. We went up to his room and did the transfer on his laptop after passing around the one hitter a few times.

Phil only had \$700 in cash on him, but said he had more downstairs in his box and he'd grab the rest in a few hours. I left the room and hopped into a \$4/8 game with plans to meet him later. I had given up trying to grind my way to \$10k before the Main Event. Now my goal was just to survive.

After a few hours of grinding, I was up a hundred. I cashed out and headed back to Phil's room to collect the other \$400 from the poker site transfer. He was chilling in front of his laptop, still high on weed and practicing backgammon with the Snowie AI. I sat down and took a few puffs from his one hitter. Then disaster almost hit.

Phil seemed confused when I asked for the money. He was sure he had given me the whole \$1100. I was equally sure he hadn't. We went back and forth for a few minutes and I realized he wasn't trying to rip me off. He just really had no doubt in his mind our deal had been completed. He was a true believer.

My heart sunk. I started to doubt myself. After all, we were both pretty high when we had done the transfer. But my bankroll was small and embarrassingly easy to keep track of. Phil continued insisting he had paid the whole thing and I began to stop arguing as I realized I was going to have to eat the loss. Then he pulled out a brick of hundreds from his pocket and reenacted the deal.

"I remember exactly, Dutch. I counted it out like this..." He started to quickly count out bills, but once he got to eight he slowed down and something changed in his expression.

"Shit," he said. "You're right."

He handed over the four hundred and spent the next ten minutes apologizing for putting me through the anxiety and talking about how crazy memory is. He had been so certain. A small disaster was averted and it felt like I had just split a big pot after getting it all-in pre flop with AK against AA.

Life Lesson #25
Always get a receipt.



The 2002 WSOP was winding down. Upstairs in Benny's Bullpen, ESPN cameras were setting up to cover the final table for the first time in several years. Hellmuth was hamming it up as part of the broadcast team, and had criticized the play of the eventual winner, Robert Varkyoni, even going as far to say he would shave his head if Varkyoni won the event. Hellmuth would make good on the promise. After the last card was dealt, and Varkyoni was declared the new game's champion, rather than rush around Robert, the cameras and the crowd rushed around Hellmuth... who had an electric razor all ready to go.

I watched as Hellmuth buzzed his hair. But during the rest of the Main Event and final table, I was in the original cardroom grinding away at \$4/\$8. There was a young dealer who had pitched several cards my way those weeks named Joe Bartholdi. He was 22, lanky, and had his hair slicked back.

Joe was a good dealer, great even, slinging cards across a table with ease and foregoing casual conversation with the players to instead focus on watching the game. But there was also an uneasiness to him behind the box which I recognize now as the same feeling I used to get in college when a professor lectured on about a subject I didn't care about.

It was dealer's frustration. Like so many poker dealers, Joe wanted to be in the action. He would rather be sitting in the game, grinding away ten dollars an hour, than dealing to it making double that. When the action in the room started slowing down, Joe took every early out he could. Then he'd change out of his dealer's uniform and buy into the limit games he'd just been dealing to.

The first time Joey sat down next to me at the \$4/8, I didn't even recognize him as the same kid who had been dealing to me at the tables all week. He laughed when I did a double take after I introduced myself to him and realized he was the same guy. Joey looked completely different as a player. His slick-backed hair was let loose into a cool shaggy mess, California skater-style. A

dorky Binion's uniform, white shirt buttoned all the way up his chin tucked into black slacks, had been replaced with a loose hoodie and jeans. But it wasn't just his clothes that made Joey seem different. When he played, he was confident and self-assured. He was happy. It was a complete transformation.

Joey would end up becoming as good a friend as I've had in the poker world. He'd become one of The Crew, and would go on to win close to \$4 million in the WPT Championship several years later. His jackpot win would show the whole poker world Joey was a champion. But it didn't make him one... he was already a champion. He had the "it" factor, the unexplainable something that separates the good players from the great. I saw it from the first time he check-raised in that low limit game.

After a few orbits, and some light conversation, Joey said the words which cemented our friendship.

"So... Dutch... do you smoke?"

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Drugs are everywhere in poker. For the first few years when the WSOP moved to the Rio, the smoking areas right outside the tournament doors would be filled every break with players passing around joints and pipes. At every stop on the poker tournament trail, the hotel hallways always smell of dank weed.

Casinos have started to crackdown on drug use. In 2010, Harrah's announced a new WSOP policy against marijuana and banned a player caught smoking on a break. I heard rumors in the Amazon room that the player had been sitting on a nice chip stack during the \$25,000 six-handed event when it happened. If true, it was an expensive hit.

Another fairly well-known poker player, Dan "wretchy" Martin, was caught by Venetian security in 2012. He had a commanding stack, with 70,000 chips in a \$1,100 buy-in event, when he took a trip on break to the parking lot to get stoned. The casino security pulled him out of his car and passed him onto LV Metro. He was disqualified from the tournament and got a lifetime ban.

Even with the recent crackdowns, every summer at the Series you will see dozens of kids rush down the red carpet outside the Rio WSOP entrance, trotting to their cars to get their drug fixes in. When I was a younger player, I would have been one of them. For the first six years of my poker career, I maintained a constant marijuana buzz. It was only after meeting my current girlfriend, Michele, that I cutback and eventually stopped smoking weed altogether. I argued to her once that I played better stoned because I was able to continue unfazed when I'd lose a big pot. She said something which really stuck, and is something I tell other players now when they try to convince me a marijuana high helps their game.

“You’re *supposed* to care when you lose!”

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Back to Binion's. Summer of 2002. Joey and I took a break from the game and headed to the Horseshoe employee parking lot. Joey had every angle of the place figured out, and parked his car right underneath the security cameras so he wouldn't have to worry about being caught on tape getting high. We passed around his pipe, which was filled with bud a bit cheaper than what I'd been smoking with Laak. Still good, though.

We went back inside for a few more hours of grinding. Joey called it a day and headed home. I was just above even, and decided to go chill with Phil again. Upstairs in Phil's room, he asked how I'd been doing, and I admitted it had been a rough few weeks. He suggested I try the games in Northern California. Phil said the \$10-200 Spread Limit Hold'em game he and Antonio had been crushing was one of the juiciest games in the country.

Phil was sharing the rent with Antonio on a two-bedroom apartment in San Jose, just a few minutes from Bay 101. There was a big backgammon tournament coming up in Monte Carlo that Laak was going to be traveling to in July. He was undecided about whether he wanted to go back to California after the Series or spend some time in New York. Phil offered to sublet his room in San Jose for two months if I wanted to give the Northern Cali poker scene

a shot. He'd only charge me what the room was costing him and he'd even throw in his car.

It was a tempting offer, but the rent would cost me \$1,400 for the two months, and I told him I really didn't have the roll for it. So he made me a deal. If I wanted the room, I could put off paying him until I grinded my bankroll up to \$10,000. If I burned out and went broke, I wouldn't have to pay.

Sold. Phil gave me his house key and his car key, along with the address. A day later, he left Vegas.

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After the 2002 WSOP Main Event ended, and Hellmuth shaved his head, Binion's went back to normal. Just a week before, the tables had been bustling with action and the Bullpen had been full of high stakes games. There had been a waiting list for every limit. Now, the casino was nearly empty. Just a couple of old regulars in a \$2/4 game. I stuck around Vegas for a few more days before booking a flight to San Jose.

When I got to the SJC airport, I grabbed a taxi and recited the address to my new home. I arrived to find a 1982 Hyundai Pony in the driveway. It didn't surprise me Phil would have a cheap car, but the old hatchback was taking it to a whole new level. The car was almost old enough to drink.

The paint was rusting and the entire passenger side door was caved in from an accident. I'd find out later that Phil bought the car from a regular in the San Francisco games named Alex for a single hundred dollar bill. The massive dent had come from when the player had been pulling out of the Lucky Chances parking lot and had gotten too close to a guard post. When the post ran against the side of the Pony, instead of backing the car up and readjusting his exit, Alex put the gas to the floor and let the damage be done.

Antonio knew I'd be coming, of course, but I knocked on the door anyway. Phil had told Antonio about the sublet arrangement in Vegas, and Antonio didn't seem too thrilled about the idea of sharing his space with an unknown 21-year

old poker hopeful. But he tolerated it after Phil insisted it didn't make sense for him to pay two months worth of rent if he wasn't going to be in town.

I knocked again on the door. Antonio wasn't home. He'd turn out to rarely be at home, spending nearly every waking hour that summer at Bay 101. The apartment was well furnished with a solid dining room table, a few pictures on the walls, and a rather expensive-looking entertainment setup in the living room. Phil's room, however, looked like something Bobby would have approved of. It contained a single piece of furniture... a Queen-sized bed.

I unpacked my duffel-bag and setup my laptop. I googled "san jose tournament schedule" and saw an event starting in an hour at Garden City. It looked perfect, so I locked up the place and hopped into the Hyundai hatchback.

It wouldn't start. I realized it didn't have an automatic transmission. I went back into the house and googled "how to drive a stick shift".



I quickly became a regular in the Garden City and Bay 101 low-limit games, as well as the tournaments, but the bankroll was barely moving. I kept vampire hours and played in bad games in the early AM on weekdays. I noticed a number of players in those cash games wore a gaming badge with the word "PROP" highlighted in pink. They were tough competition across the board.

I asked Jesse Rodgers, who was still running the Garden City tournaments, what the deal was with all of the props. He explained to me what the job was. The word "prop" stood for "proposition player". These guys (and they were all guys) would have a work schedule just like the dealers and cashiers. But instead of working, they'd fill the empty seats of the poker room and play cards. Props played on their own money, and would win or lose everyday just like I was doing. Except at the end of the week, they'd get a paycheck.

The job sounded promising. I asked Jesse to help me get hired as a prop. He introduced me to the prop manager, a friendly enough guy named Rich. I filled out an application and was hired on the spot. Before I could get on the

schedule, I'd have to get a gaming license from the city. I'd have to take a piss test.

I asked a couple of the poker dealers and the regulars what the best way to piss clean was. There were plenty of suggestions, but the one that kept coming up was cranberry juice. Three days before the test, I started drinking the juice. Nothing else. Just Ocean Spray, every day, all day. Right up until I went to the testing center at the gaming license office.

It had only been two weeks since I'd taken my last toke with Joey in Vegas. It was the only time in my life I had test anxiety.

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In a 2001 *Wired* article, the magazine published a story about some guy in South Carolina named Kenneth Curtis who created a successful online business called PrivacyPro.com. He sold drug-free urine kits to people. The kits came with a liquid pouch filled with his own guaranteed drug-free urine that you could strap to your leg, a tiny hose, and pockets in the pouch where you'd insert chemical hand warmers included with the purchase.

Drug testing is a \$6 *billion* industry. There was a lot of demand for Kenneth Curtis' clean urine kits. According to the article, he would constantly chug coffee, tea, and juice. He was able to produce an average of 50 samples a day. He'd sell the kits for \$70 a pop. That's \$3500 a day, more than \$100,000 a month. Just for pissing in a jar.

Eventually, a South Carolina lawmaker decided Curtis shouldn't be able to sell his pee to help people pass drug tests. So they made it illegal down there to sell urine with the intent to defraud a drug or alcohol test. Curtis kept his business going anyway, kept chugging and selling, hoping to skirt the law by adding the words "for novelty use only" on his website. He was arrested and sentenced to six months in prison.

Today, his site is still running. You can still buy the kits, but the pouch comes empty. You have to find a friend to fill it up for you.

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The cranberry juice worked like a charm. I passed the test. I was a prop player.

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I've seen some threads online where people criticize prop players as being the worst in the club. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's a tough gig, and every single one of the props at Garden City were talented players. If they couldn't at least break-even in the games, they didn't last long. The good news for losing props, though, is by the time their bankroll runs dry they already have their gaming license and probably have enough connections in the casino to easily make the switch to the dealer box.

If you are a new player trying to get into the game, I'd definitely recommend getting a job as a prop or a dealer. Both jobs give you the opportunity to witness a lot of hands. Some of the best players in the game started out as one or the other. Layne Flack, Scott Fischman, Mike Matusow, Scotty Nguyen, Ted Forrest and Joe Bartholdi all started behind the dealer box. On the other side, Bryan Devonshire, Chip Jett and Kenna James all were former props.

I spent the rest of summer clocking into the graveyard shift and playing a full eight hours before clocking out. The pay was pretty good. Every week, I'd get a check for just over minimum wage for the hours worked plus a rake offset for the estimated amount I contributed to the hole. After taxes it was over a grand. Best of all, I could cash it right there at the cage.

The games would often be short-handed and I'd have to hold my own against the other props in the club. The two best props were a couple guys named Steve and Roy. They'd humble me every time we played together. It was obvious I was outclassed, and I started self-reflecting.

One night I had a breakthrough in a short-handed \$20/40 game when I picked up a pretty strong tell on a guy. The game was played with \$5 chips, so a bet on the turn would consist of eight chips. The guy was loose and aggressive (what

I'd later learn to call a "lagtard"), and when he raised preflop he would usually continue betting on every street even if he missed.

After a few showdowns, I noticed he would make his turn bet differently when he was strong versus when he was moderately weak. Most of the time when betting the turn, he would smoothly put two stacks in front of himself and then push the top of the stacks forward, so the chips fall forward into a straight line, like two ramps.

Then one hand he didn't push over the two stacks. When he got to the showdown I saw he had made a nut flush on the turn. Towers meant strength, toppled ramps meant weakness. It was a great tell, and it certainly helped me win a lot of chips... but that wasn't the breakthrough.

The breakthrough was I realized I had been doing the same thing. I thought of all the times I had flopped a set and couldn't get paid off, all the times I missed a flush and couldn't get a fold. All those towers. All those ramps.

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"The perfect is the enemy of the good."

Voltaire

"Good is the enemy of great."

Jim Collins

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

It's hard to admit you aren't the best at something. I had spent the last several years thinking because I'd read a few books and was winning at poker, I had the game all figured out. The summer propping in San Jose taught me there is always more to learn about this game. I was picking up more and more tells on players, and noticing the same leaks in my own game. Elevation tells, distance tells, timing tells, sound tells. I started seeing them everywhere, including in myself. I worked hard on standardizing my actions at the table. It's a hard thing to do and something I still admittedly haven't perfected.

I love those two quotes by Voltaire and Jim Collins. The Voltaire quote is very applicable to many things in life. Whether it be relationships, a website you are building, a business you are starting, or a book you are writing. All too often, we get obsessed with perfection and allow it to stand in the way of something good.

But it's the Collins quote I think is most applicable to poker. Every year at the WSOP, I see good players who were like I was in 2002. They are winners online and probably have a positive ROI at the Series. But they aren't getting better because they think they have the game all figured out. They sit in a WSOP tournament wearing Beats By Dre headphones and distracting themselves with their Twitter account. They play a good game on cruise control instead of treating every single hand like an opportunity to improve.

I've heard a lot of these players blame variance for their lack of bracelets. I've heard them criticize *truly great* poker players like Hellmuth, Ivey and Brunson.

Variance is real... but great players win bracelets.



I bought my first ounce of weed after I picked up my first paycheck. I had taken down a small tournament earlier in the week, and had held my head above water during my graveyard shifts. So when payday came, my bankroll was expanding. I decided I should celebrate. My plan was to smoke a joint and watch *Rounders*.

I drove down to Valley Fair mall, the same place I had been working as a Macy's grunt just three years prior. I hit up a media store, Sam Goody's, and looked for a copy of *Rounders* on DVD. They didn't have it in stock. I couldn't leave the store empty handed. I was there to celebrate, so I grabbed the first thing which caught my eye.

"I guess I'll take this," I said to the cashier as I slid over a boxed collector's set of *Star Trek: The Next Generation – Season 1*.

It had just come out on DVD. I remembered always liking ST:TNG growing up. My brother and I watched it all the time on our local stations in Kansas City. It eventually got syndicated to the point where it was airing twice a day. It probably still is.

“That will be... \$141.20.”

I didn’t expect a three-figure price tag, but pulled a wad of hundreds and peeled two off just the same. The cashier bagged up the DVD, and I walked out of the mall feeling like a baller.

But when I got to my car, or rather my loaner, and took a good look at that huge dent in the passenger side panel, I felt a sudden rush of buyer’s remorse. I looked at the tiny plastic bag holding the DVD boxed set. I hadn’t liked the show *that* much. It was good, but I went in for a \$20 copy of *Rounders*. Instead I had just traded a day of my life for an old 80s sci-fi television show which was probably playing on TNT at the same moment I stood in the parking lot.

I thought about going back in for the return, but decided it would be too embarrassing. No. I would keep it. And I would watch it. Every episode. Because I deserved to celebrate.

I started the Hyundai, which always started rough. As I drove out of the Valley Fair parking lot, I let out a long sigh.

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Life Lesson #26

Holding on to winnings is like holding on to water.

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There’s an old joke in poker about a tournament champion who has won millions, but is dead broke. Someone asks him what he did with his money. He replies, “Half of it I spent on hookers and blow... and the other half I *wasted!*”

A few months ago, I was watching the last episode of a poker reality show, *2 months 2 million* on Netflix. The show is about four young poker players, Dani “Anski” Stern, Jay “KRANTZ” Rosencrantz, Brian “flawless_victory” Roberts, and Emil “whitelime” Patel who all share a house in Vegas for 8 weeks and try to grind out a couple million dollars. I had heard a few jokes when the show started airing that they should have called it *2 months 2 thousand* and so rather than watch the whole struggle play out, I skipped to the end to see if there was any truth to the joke. There wasn’t. The four of them did fine, though falling short of their lofty seven-figure goal.

In the last episode, there was a scene with Dani Stern. He went on a huge rush and ended up winning over \$70,000 in a single day. To reward himself, he went down to a little boutique shop in a mini-mall across the street from the Hard Rock and bought himself a pair of snakeskin gold-laced tennis shoes. The receipt came out to \$2,162.

I got a little sick to my stomach watching the scene. I didn’t hold it against Anski for buying himself some nice shoes. The look on his face when he walked around the store in those white Nikes made it obvious this was a special purchase for him. But *holy shit*. Two thousand dollars for a pair of shoes. It’s obscene. A full two month’s worth of minimum wage for a pair of shoes he can’t even feel comfortable running in. Sure, he had a \$70k day. But it’s still spending *someone’s* two months of life, even if it’s not his.

I completely related to how Anski was feeling. Every poker player I know who wins a big score ends up blowing a lot of money on stupid shit they don’t need.

At least Anski blew his money on something physical he could hold and look at and wear. It’s more than I can say for the countless dollars I and other poker players have wasted on drugs and overpriced alcohol, tables at nightclubs, and lap dances.



When I got back to my place, Antonio was home. I hid the *Star Trek* DVD set in my room like a porn flick. He didn’t seem like a trekkie, and I didn’t feel like

getting made fun of for the buy. I looked up to Antonio and didn't want him thinking I was a nerd.

I asked Antonio if he knew where I could buy some weed. Of course he did. He called up an old dealer who was at the door an hour later with a small cooler and a pit bull. He came inside, leading the pit bull with a choke chain and a thick leather leash. Antonio introduced me, and sat down at his heavy dining room table. His table was the very first splurge Antonio had made after his own first big score at poker. Antonio was blowing money buying tables from the very beginning.

I looked through the selection in the old dealer's cooler as if I knew what the difference between "Afghan Kush" and "Blueberry" actually was. They all looked and smelled the same to me, so I picked out one that cost somewhere in the middle of "cheapest" and "most expensive" and handed the guy four hundred dollar bills for the ounce. The dealer left, and I asked Antonio if he had some rolling papers. Of course he did.

I asked Antonio if he wanted to smoke some, but he turned it down. He had a game to go crush, his own personal ATM courtesy of the fine players at Bay 101. I wondered if some of those guys losing every day had gotten their bankrolls from being on the right side of an IPO during the Dot-Com days just three years before.

After Antonio left, I scrounged up a deck of cards, tore off a quarter inch strip off the joker, and rolled a cheap imitation of the magician's joint. I lit it up and watched Captain Picard face off with Q in "Encounter at Farpoint".

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Even high and coming off a good week at the tables, the first season of *Star Trek* was nowhere near as good as I remembered.

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One Saturday, I had a day off from propping and Antonio called me from the Bay 101 game. He asked if I could drive a bit of weed and a pipe over to the casino. When I pulled into the parking lot, I shot him a call and he came out a few minutes later with one of the players from his Spread Limit game. They approached the car, and I packed up a front-loading glass pipe I had rewarded myself with earlier that week.

I offered it to Antonio, who shook his head and just gestured to the random player, who eagerly accepted the front-loader and took several deep tokes. He passed it back and I did the same. A few more repeats, and I put the pipe back into the trunk. Antonio called me all the way over to Bay 101 just to get this guy high.

There was a noon tournament starting in a few minutes which I decided to play, so I walked through the lot towards the cardroom with Antonio and his opponent. The two of us were in a stony daze, but Antonio was fresh and alert, rolling a Kennedy half-dollar along his knuckles... an old gambler's trick he'd been doing as a magician for years. He had the flourish down almost perfect.

Almost. Thirty feet from the casino entrance, Esfandiari dropped the coin. The fifty cent piece started to roll along our path towards the door, and he followed President Kennedy like a kid chasing a ball into the street. Then it took a weird curve and the coin made a long rolling arc before rolling away from the door and back towards the parking lot behind us. Antonio started to turn around to reclaim his coin, but then after two steps he shook his head dismissively at the half dollar and continued on his original path towards the Bay 101 entrance.

“Leave it for the railbirds!” He said it with flair.

There's not a better story I can think of which better demonstrates the attitude of The Magician. I would have turned around and followed the coin to San Francisco, but Esfandiari wouldn't change his course.

I thought about that day in the parking lot a year later, when Antonio would put together a movie outing during the 2003 WSOP. The sequel to *The Matrix* was just hitting theaters, and Antonio organized a group to watch it at the

Neonopolis on Fremont Street. Laak asked if I wanted to join, which I did, and we watched Keanu Reeves battle the AI overlords with some of the biggest names in poker, along with a few people I didn't recognize. I asked Antonio about one of the guys there who seemed very out of place. I thought maybe he was one of the bigger cash game players. Antonio said he was nobody. So I asked why he invited him to his baller movie outing.

Antonio just laughed and said, "You gotta feed the fish!"

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Of all the players I've run across, Antonio is the best at handling the losers at the table. He has a likable way about him that makes players accept their losses with a smile. The magic tricks help. Esfandiari has an anti-gravity trick which is worlds better than any chip flourish I can pull off. He used to laugh about a guy who would dump thousands to him. After every big loss, the guy would grumble and insist on seeing the anti-gravitational pop-up move. Antonio would oblige and the guy would return back to a happy mood, ready to lose some more. I imagine thousands of players have been busted in a game Esfandiari crushed, only to go home and say to themselves, "At least it went to Antonio!"

That anti-gravity move is called the "muscle pass" in magic circles. It was popularized by a magician named John Cornelius. The interesting thing to me about the muscle pass is that it is painful to perform. There's no gaff to it or any real trick to it. You have to spend hours upon hours training your palm muscles to squeeze the chip hard enough to propel it into the air. After a few passes, the muscle connecting your thumb to your palm starts to throb.

It must have taken six months for Antonio to have mastered his anti-gravitational pop-up move, and it's a little sad picturing him sitting alone with a poker chip, massaging a very sore hand after a couple hours of frustratingly slow progress. It must have been such strong dedication. And in the end, it paid off. Of all the magicians in the world, Antonio has no doubt made more money off his muscle pass than any of them. Even John Cornelius himself.

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At the end of the summer, I'd meet the one player I've come across who has come closest to Antonio in making opponents feel good about losing. His name was Darin Thomas, and I'd meet him while propping in the \$4/8 Stud Hi-Low game at Garden City. Darin had been working in San Jose hosting weekend auto sales promotions, but business had turned south after September 11th. When I met him, he was making his rent as a regular on the low-limit felt.

Darin was a consistent winner. He'd buy in for a rack and leave with a four or five hundred dollar profit almost every time he sat down. He was a 6'2", heavysset Trinidadian with a contagious laugh that could loosen up any table. I'd see Darin later in LA, and he'd stay with me during the 2005 Series in Vegas. Darin would introduce me to Johnny Monnette, who at the time was a fresh micro-limit grinder. Darin would later even spend close to a year grinding away cash games online from my Missouri pad with Bobby and me. And Darin would share some of his Stud Hi-Low secrets that allowed him to crush those Garden City games and would eventually guide me to several WSOP final tables.

After losing a rack to Darin in the first Stud Hi-Low game we played together, I found myself not caring. We became pretty good friends that summer, saw a few movies and had a few dinners.

I had lost a decent chunk early that morning in a short-handed \$20/40 game the floorman had directed me to sit in. It was a five-handed bloodbath, with the two best props Steve and Roy, a weekend warrior named HZ who was the best of the non-employee regulars, and another random hustler. All four, I'm sure, correctly identified me as the soft seat. I ended up losing a week's salary.

Darin and I had some breakfast after my shift ended. I was feeling pretty low.

"Why are you propping, Dutch? It makes no sense."

"The pay is pretty good, Darin."

He laughed. “Not when you get seated in the worst games in the club! Winning is all about finding the easiest games.”

There was something to this. But even though my propping job constantly put me in some bad games, the weekly paycheck more than made up for the occasional losses. I explained as much to Darin, who responded with a line which made me doubt myself.

“You’re clocking in and out every day. You have a boss that tells you where to sit and when you can leave. You have an employee badge and a timecard, man. You have no control of yourself as a prop.

“The only good thing about playing poker for a living is you don’t have to worry about day-to-day normal job shit. Isn’t the whole idea having the freedom to do what you want, when you want? Seems to me a prop job completely defeats the point.”

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As I clocked in and out over the next few days, I’d hear Darin’s words in my head. The propping job had been going well, and my bankroll had expanded to just under \$8k. But it was still a job. I had been working for only a month and was already getting burnt out.

I decided to ask the prop manager at Garden City for a week off so I could take a shot in some tournaments. One of the top tournament directors, Matt Savage, had just finished a tournament series at Bay 101 called *The Battle of the Bay*. I had finished a solid but disappointing 15th in the main event, cashing for \$800. I was eager to take a shot at some more tournaments, and Savage suggested the *San Francisco Open* series would be getting good numbers. The tournament series was being held in San Pablo just an hour north of where I was staying.

I drove the Hyundai Pony up to the first tournament of the series, a \$50 Limit Hold’em Rebuy event with a \$15 buy-in fee. The tournament drew a massive

field due to a \$40k guaranteed prize pool. I took my seat with a full room of 362 players all gunning for the first place spot.

One of the first things I learned about poker tournaments is it doesn't matter how big the field is. There can be 1,000 entrants in the running or 100,000. It doesn't matter because you are effectively only playing one table. Just eight or nine other players. If you look around the table, and the next person to get knocked out is always someone else, then you'll end up crossing the finish line as the winner.

Structures were faster back then, with casinos viewing tournaments primarily as a way to fill seats in the cash games with players who have busted. The levels in that Limit Hold'em event flew by rapidly, and after about eight hours of play, I was sitting at the final table.

The director brought out trophies for first, second and third place. All three trophies took the form of wine bottles, with the tournament details engraved on the front. The trophy looked better than a bottle of Dom Perignon.

We continued playing, and when it was down to five, the other players started talking about making a deal. The chips were fairly even, and there was a lot of money at stake. Even back then, I realized when someone offers a deal at the table, you usually have them in what Darin would call "a power position". I was the deal-breaker and we played on.

I continued aggressively raising the blinds, picking my spots, and building my stack as the other players were felted one by one. It was finally headsup. Just me against a middle-aged, roundish Mexican from Sunnyvale named Ernesto Alarin. A few dozen spectators gathered around the table, almost unanimously cheering for my opponent. Ernesto had me covered by a single big blind, which was so big at this point that we both had only around ten blinds in front of us. I caught a decent hand, JTo, and played it strong against his pocket queens when I flopped top pair.

The tournament was over. I had lost.



In 1995, two psychologists from Cornell published a scientific paper examining the emotions of silver and bronze medalists at the Olympics. Their methods revealed a drastic increase in the satisfaction bronze medalists received as opposed to silver medalists. Taking second in a competition is demonstrably worse, on a psychological level, than taking third.

What they found wasn't much of a surprise. One of the most important American philosophers and psychologists, William James, had suggested this truth more than one hundred years before in his book *Principles of Psychology*, when he wrote:

So we have the paradox of a man shamed to death because he is only the second pugilist or the second oarsman in the world. That he is able to beat the whole population of the globe minus one is nothing; he has "pitted" himself to beat that one; and as long as he doesn't do that nothing else counts.

Of course, this result is counterintuitive. We should feel better about our accomplishments if we finish higher in a competition than somebody else. Yet we don't. The Cornell team submitted a theory on why this happens, based on a concept pioneered by behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman called "counterfactual thinking."

The basic concept of counterfactual thinking is that when events happen, we can't but help ask ourselves a series of "what ifs." According to the Cornell researchers, it is easier for an Olympic medalist finishing in third place to compare their achievement downward, asking themselves "what if I had finished fourth." The silver finisher frames this question differently, asking themselves "what if I had won."



"Coming second in a poker tournament isn't losing.

Coming second in a knife fight is losing."

T.J. Cloutier, 2x WSOP Main Event runner-up



After the last card was dealt, I shook my opponents hand in defeat. The crowd of spectators gathered around Ernesto, cheering his success. I watched, feeling rejected and empty, as his photo was taken for the poker magazines. I took my bottle of wine (every tournament should have trophies) and turned the handful of chips I had just won into a brick of hundred dollar bills. Then I exited the casino and walked slowly through the parking lot to begin the long drive home.

The disappointment of second wouldn't wear off until the next morning, when the reality of my score set in. This was my first major cash. The finish netted me over \$11,000, and it more than doubled my bankroll, which was now close to \$20k.

I started to feel better. Phil Laak would be returning from Monte Carlo in a couple of weeks, and I'd have enough to pay him for the room. It was starting to look like a great summer. I played the rest of the San Pablo tournaments without so much as a cash. Then I went back to clocking into my prop shifts.



When Phil Laak came back from throwing backgammon dice in Monaco, I had already given my two weeks notice to the prop manager at Garden City. Besides the San Pablo score, I had taken down two of the local Garden City nightly tourneys, as well as one of the Bay 101 weekend tourneys. My new plan was to focus on tournaments.

Back in Montreal, I remember something Monty had expressed about the Golden Palace players. He said a new casino player who wins their very first bet on the site was worth several magnitudes more than a player who loses their first bet. He had even gone so far as to see if the Kahnawake Gaming Commission (the Indian tribe which licensed Golden Palace and many of the bigger online gambling sites at the time) would allow the casino to modify their software to force a win after every new player's first bet. Kahnawake wouldn't let it happen. The Gaming Commission maintained that every pull

of an online slot handle had to be a random event, even if a nonrandom pull would only lead to a positive result for the player.

Early success in poker tournaments is a common theme among many of the regular grinders on the trail today. Looking back with over a decade of experience, I have little doubt my initial scores in San Jose were what statisticians refer to as “several deviations from the mean”. Poker tournaments are fluky, and even the best players in the world can’t sustain triple digit ROI percentages forever. But I didn’t see it that way. Like a slot player who wins after their very first pull on the handle, I saw tournament poker as an ATM machine which would continue to pay out forever.

Rebekah, the indie filmmaker, had offered to let me stay on her couch anytime I was in LA. There was a tournament series coming up at Larry Flynt’s Hustler Club called The Grand Slam of Poker. It seemed like a good reason to take Rebekah up on her offer.

I paid Phil for his room and the generous use of his beat-up Hyundai hatchback. It was time to make moves.



At about the hour mark in *Rounders*, Matt Damon’s character narrates that “the poker room at the Mirage in Vegas is the center of the poker universe.” For all the movie got right, this is one of the things it got very wrong. While Vegas is the center of the poker universe during the month or so of the WSOP, for the rest of the year the real center is in Los Angeles.

In 2002, the first time I visited LA, the Commerce Casino had more poker tables running than all of Vegas. Commerce is still the largest poker room in the world. But the highest open limit game was at the Hustler Club. For years, Larry Flynt had been leaking money to the top Seven Card Stud players in a \$2k/4k game. Unlike today’s high limit games at Bellagio and Aria, which are tucked away behind a glass room with a VIP feel to them, the Larry Flynt game was played right in the center of the casino floor just feet away from the \$2/4 limit games. If it wasn’t for the rotating cast of poker’s greatest, and the

security guard making sure people didn't get too close to Larry, it might have been just another low stakes game.

Every day, as soon as Larry Flynt sat down, the seats would fill with the likes of Phil Ivey, David Oppenheim, Barry Greenstein, John Hennigan, Chip Reese, Johnny Chan, and Ted Forrest. Fortunes would be transferred around the table, hundred of thousands won or lost. The game would break as soon as Larry called it a day.

The Grand Slam of Poker looked paltry in comparison to that stud game. It was a tournament series of ten events with buy-ins of \$300 or \$500, with the main event being a \$3,000 buy-in No Limit. Kenna James took down the opening tournament, for a first place prize of more than \$60,000. It wouldn't have even gotten him through seventh street in the big game.

Even so, most of poker's tournament greats showed up for the Grand Slam series. It would mark the first time I'd play with multiple bracelet winners. The cardroom was filled with the same great players who had been roaming the halls at Binion's a couple months before. Phil Hellmuth, Allen Cunningham, Howard Lederer, Layne Flack. I was more than a little starstruck.

I went deep in two of the preliminary events. The first, a \$300 No Limit Hold'em event, ended a disappointing 10th place. The second, a \$300 Stud Hi-Low event, seemed to be going better. With two tables left, I had nearly half the chips in play when Huck Seed was moved to my table nursing a short stack. I doubled him up. Then I doubled him up again. I felt helpless as Huck kept feeding off my monster stack, eventually busting me in 12th place and going on to win the tournament.

Later that night, I'd plugin the two major match-ups we had and feel slightly better after seeing I was a small favorite in each hand. Of course, I didn't plugin any of the dozens of match-ups that got me to the min cash, many of which had me starting all but dead. This is a common activity for losers. Winners don't second-guess themselves.

After buying a seat into the Grand Slam main event, I was comped a ticket to a Larry Flynt roast. I would go to what was a banquet dinner and watch Gabe Kaplan and some other comedians I didn't know tell wheelchair and cock jokes while I ate chicken. The highlight of the roast was watching a music video Larry Flynt had put together where he sang his version of Frank Sinatra's *My Way*. Listening to Flynt's raspy and damaged voice butcher the Sinatra classic was painfully funny, and is still one of the more vivid memories I have from that summer.

One of the other more vivid memories was how I got knocked out of the main event. My first table had me sitting to the left of Men "The Master" Nguyen. Men was, and still is, one of the best tournament players in the game. He was a constant leader on the CardPlayer point rankings, and had taken the Player of the Year honor for the second time the year before. He's taken Player of the Year two more times since then.

With everybody at the table playing very deep, I looked down at pocket queens under the gun. I slid in a 3x the BB raise and watched as everyone folded to The Master. He said something in broken English and made the call. The flop came out a beautiful Q66. I had flopped the nut full house.

Men tapped the table for a check. My hands were shaking, a common tell for strength, as I tossed in a half-pot sized bet. The Master didn't waste any time check-raising. He smiled as he placed a healthy raise in front of him. My breathing started getting very heavy. If Men had a six for trips, I was sure he would read me for an overpair and I'd bust him. I fired in a raise. Men started laughing. He looked so happy with himself.

He gave a flippant wave of his hand and said in his heavy accent, "I'm all-in!" "I call," I said instantly and quickly turned over my hand. Men shook his head in disbelief, but he was still smiling. Then he slowly turned over his cards. It was a pair of sixes. The Master had flopped quads.

After a dozen events in Los Angeles, I cashed twice for an in-the-money (ITM) percentage of 16%. This was a decent ITM rate, however both were what we call “min cashes” and didn’t come close to getting me ahead for the series. I took every rebuy and every add-on opportunity, played every tournament, had a few losing sessions in a \$5/10 No-Limit cash game, and saw my bankroll shrink from \$20,000 down to four figures. Not so decent.

I decided to take a break from poker. Bobby had been living in Hoboken, and I asked if I could come out to visit for a week. I booked a flight and got out of LA. We saw a Ben Folds Five concert in the city, and snagged some tickets to David Letterman. Bobby was getting paid well at his sales job with Juniper. He was selling network routers to corporate clients and fat commission checks kept rolling in. But I could tell he hated his job.

I flew back to Missouri to decide my next step. I still had hopes I might be able to revisit Pokerspot and orchestrate some sort of turnaround. We still had the code and we also had our pending patent application for tournaments. All of my inquiries to sell the site and the software continued to go nowhere. By this time, however, PokerStars and PartyPoker were raking in truckloads of money from their poker tournaments. If our patent application went through, we’d have a line of buyers.

Then I got a call from my old law school roommate Randy. He had some bad news. The provisional patent application we had paid him to prepare for the Pokerspot tournament software had been rejected by the US Patent and Trademark Office. There would be no patent. While this was probably a good thing for the online poker industry as a whole, it was a horrible thing for Pokerspot. It felt like the final nail in the coffin.

I had no plan, no job, no clue what I was going to do. All I had was a quickly shrinking poker bankroll from the summer which would get me through just a few months at most. I found a room for rent with a former church buddy and spent the next couple months smoking large amounts of weed, binge drinking and sinking into depression.

By December, the drugs caught up with me and another manic episode had triggered. After several days of not sleeping, I became convinced we were all living in a simulation running on an alien computer. I found myself right back in the mental hospital I had been twice admitted to earlier that year. I was discharged a few days before Christmas, and spent my birthday and the rest of the holidays in a prescription drug haze, now nearly broke, feeling broken and defeated.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Crew

**“I’m bored with that line. I never use it anymore. My new line is
‘In 15 minutes everybody will be famous.’”**

Andy Warhol

At the beginning of 2003, just weeks out of my third stint in a mental hospital, Bobby was laid off from his sales job at Juniper. The same week, I got an email from Ron Tarter, the Antiguan bookie who ran CyberSportsbook.com. Ron had come around to understand the value of a poker site. He was interested in seeing if we could integrate the Pokerspot software with his own site’s back-end.

With my brother and me both jobless, we agreed to move to Antigua for a couple months to see whether we could get the two pieces of software working with each other. Ron flew us out at the beginning of February, setting us up with a house in Jolly Harbor on the sandy Caribbean beach, and two desks in his operation center in the capital city of St. John’s. Ron also gave us each \$5k as a good faith downpayment towards the licensing deal he was confident we’d be able to work out once Bobby could get the two pieces of code talking.

When we got to the island, I reverted to my hands-off approach towards the technology. Bobby spent two months tinkering with the software, making the Pokerspot package plugin to CyberSportsbook. I spent two months reading Vonnegut novels on the beach, stoned on the ditchweed I was scoring regularly from a local beach bum named Bonnington. I only went into the office a handful of times, and when I did it was only to load up Paradise Poker and play a session of \$5/\$10 Limit Hold’em.

One weekend in Antigua, Bobby and I took a day-trip to the neighboring island of Montserrat with one of Ron's coders named Eddie. The island is famous for two things. First, it's the home of a calypso musician named Arrow, who wrote the song *Hot, Hot, Hot*. The song was later covered by Buster Poindexter, who did a music video with Bill Murray which got near endless airplay on MTV. Second, it's the home of an active volcano which, after being dormant for centuries, woke up and forced the evacuation of most of the island. The first couple years of eruptions were nothing more than ash and mud. Then in 1997, the volcano erupted pyroclastic flow which wiped out the tiny country's airport and capital, as well as nineteen islanders who had refused to evacuate.

The three of us took a bus tour around the island, and from as close as we were allowed, took pictures in front of the steaming mountains. The tour guide on our bus told the story of a similar volcano in Martinique, which erupted at the turn of the 20th century and killed the whole town of St. Pierre. More than 30,000 people died. The only survivor was a guy named August Cyparis, who had started a drunken bar fight the night before the disaster. As punishment, he was thrown into a concrete jail cell with no windows and only a small ventilation grating in the door. It was the only building in the city which was strong enough to withstand the lava flow.

August was found by a rescue team four days later. He was badly burned and everybody he had ever known was dead, but he had survived. He changed his name to Ludger Sylbaris and joined the circus.

Our Montserrat tour ended at a souvenir shop where we could buy postcards, calypso drums, lava rocks, and bone pipes. Bobby bought a drum. I bought a pipe.

It was late when we got back to our beach house. We loaded the bone pipe with Bonnington's seedy ditchweed. After getting a throat full of ash, we switched back to a Bicycle-filtered Magician's joint (I was starting to get rather good at rolling them). Then we went out to the beach and enjoyed the full moon. I've heard the unaided human eye can see 3,000 stars. Bobby and I spent a full hour listening to the crashing waves and marveling at the thousands of reflections glimmering on the incoming surf. The world felt alive.



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My toxicology report came up positive for cocaine, which was confusing because I had never done coke. The Antiguan mental hospital's psychiatrist, Dr. James King, told me some of the island's dealers laced their weed with the drug to create a physical addiction. That would explain why I had started to feel like I couldn't go more than a few hours without needing to smoke a joint. Cocaine might have been the trigger.

The trigger might also have been that our deal with Ron had evaporated, which caused quite a lot of stress. CyberSportsbook was getting their software license terminated by their provider, a Canadian company called Starnet. Ron would scramble for the next year to get his business back on track before eventually selling his site. I think he made out alright. I heard he eventually bought a submarine and started a business giving underwater tours.

Regardless of what it was exactly that caused my fourth breakdown, I went crazy again in Antigua.

A few years later, I'd run into an Antiguan poker site operator who told me the rumor he heard was I'd been deported after I tried to burn down a yacht. What actually happened was I fell under the delusion one night that I was to travel to a hidden island located in the Bermuda Triangle, where I'd meet representatives from an ancient, omnipotent intergalactic society. To get there, I commandeered a golf cart from one of my neighbors, along with several red canisters of gasoline, and drove slowly and steadily towards the pier. Once at the pier, it was my intention to drive the golf cart off the pier "onto" the ocean, where presumably I'd be able to cruise on the water as easily as Jesus walked the Galilean Sea.

The golf cart, which had a front-wheel drive, was too slow to make it over the pier. Instead, the front axle went over the pier and the bottom of the cart got stuck on the edge. Not to be deterred, I hopped out of the golf cart and onto a nearby sailboat. I took my position at the helm, rummaging through maps and turning the wheel back and forth.

It was very early, probably three in the morning, and it didn't occur to me that people live on their sailboats. If the owner of this particular sailboat had been frightened of the intruder in his home, he didn't show it as he emerged from below deck. He was very calm (probably because he was armed) as he asked me what I was doing on his boat. I told him about my meeting. He suggested I get off his boat and go home. I did.

Bobby had been sleeping while this bit of craziness played out. When I got back to the beach house, I woke him up and paced through the living room rambling on in my manic state. Then I climbed onto the roof, still spouting a constant stream of delusional nonsense. Bobby started to get worried I'd jump and splatter my brain on the deck, and he tried to talk me down. I told him not to worry because I couldn't be injured by the planks. I explained to him I was immune to wood. It made perfect sense at the time.

I was still on the roof when a few Jolly Harbor security guards showed up at our house. They had been called by the owner of the sailboat, who had reported my intrusion. Bobby told the guards about my mental history, while

I stood on the roof insisting on my sanity. Eventually, they talked me down, at which time I was handcuffed and driven to the Antiguan mental hospital.

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Life Lesson #27
Don't go crazy in a third world country.

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For the next week, I would sit in another prescription drug haze inside my solitary room, which was actually an 8×10 concrete cell on the perimeter of an outside courtyard, one of dozens holding the rest of Antigua's insane. The first day I ventured out into the courtyard and made a new friend. The second day, my new friend punched me in the face for absolutely no reason I could understand. This type of senseless violence is somewhat common in mental institutions.

I met with the resident psychiatrist who told me about the cocaine in my toxicology report. I asked him how long I was going to have to stay in that horrible place, and he said they were going to keep me until he was confident I was stable enough to fly home to the States.

As I waited to be cleared for takeoff, I couldn't help but remember the story of Ludger Sylbaris, the volcano survivor. His concrete cell must have been very similar to mine. I started to think the intergalactic society I had set out to meet had orchestrated my capture to keep me safe from an impending volcanic eruption. But after the antipsychotics set in, I began to realize the reason I was in that cell was simply because I had gone crazy. Staring at the holes in the concrete ceiling, not knowing when I'd be free to go, was the lowest point of my life.

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The only positive thing about hitting rock bottom is it shows you who your true friends are. As I waited in stasis to be freed from my third world prison, two

people came to visit regularly. The first was Bobby, who will always be there for me. The second was my friend Adam, who incidentally was also the neighbor who owned the golf cart I had commandeered and driven halfway off the pier. Each time Adam would show up, he'd bring a Big Mac and a soda, which was a welcome change from the horrible meals the institution served.

Of all the friendships I made in Antigua, this is the only one I felt was worth a damn. If you ever have a buddy who is going through something similar, whether it be a hospital or a prison, a small effort to make them feel normal can provide a huge return on investment.

After about a week, I was released. I went back to the beach house, packed my suitcase, and got the hell out of Antigua.

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The 2003 World Series of Poker had already started when I arrived back in Missouri. Chris Ferguson just took down his fifth bracelet when I decided to make another trip to Vegas to chase WSOP gold. This time I'd book a one-way flight rather than turn it into a torturous thirty hour Greyhound bus drive.

When I walked into Binion's, I was met with a strong feeling of *deja vu*. The series is like a TV sitcom, with the same characters and same basic plot points every year. The same dealers, same players, same games.

Joey Bartholdi was dealing a \$10/20 Limit Hold'em game downstairs in the main cardroom. Phil and Antonio were upstairs in the tournament area busting up a No-Limit Hold'em table. Rebekah was even there again, collecting footage for her indie documentary. It felt like nothing had changed, as if I'd stepped back to last year and had another shot at playing and winning the Main Event.

Having played the World Series of Poker every year for over a decade now, I've come to recognize this is the way that every Series starts.

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Life Lesson #28
Every summer is a second chance.



I didn't jump into the biggest limit games I could that year. Instead, I took it slow and nursed my \$5,000 bankroll in the two smallest games at Binion's: \$1/2 No-Limit Hold'em and \$4/8 Limit Hold'em. It was in the No-Limit game that I met Brett Jungblut.

Brett was born to play poker. His father, Art Young, was a respected cash game player in Atlantic City. Art named his two sons, Brett and Bo, after the poker playing brothers in the old television show *Maverick*. Brett learned to count from the pips on cards. He once showed me an old photograph of Amarillo Slim holding Brett as a baby, posing next to his father.

Brett was 23 years old, with a hearty laugh and a relaxed attitude. He stood out at every table as the most aggressive player. He seemed to play every single hand, and also seemed to be booking wins even without folding pre flop. Brett carried the strong scent of weed everywhere he went. We became instant friends.



Brett and I spent a lot of time smoking weed together. I told Brett about an idea I had for a poker site called Rakefree.com. The basic premise was an online cardroom without a rake. We spent hours, stoned, talking about what the rake-free concept could mean to poker, and how it could end up changing the game entirely. Brett had been one of the first players on Planet back at the start of online poker, and he understood better than most how much the rake hurts a player's win rate. He loved the idea of a rake-free site and wanted to be part of it.

I introduced Brett to Joe Bartholdi, and between Joey's dealer downs at the tables, the three of us would take a walk to the Binion's employee lot and smoke blunts in Joe's car. We talked a lot about poker. It all seemed profound.

Brett had dropped out of college just one class from graduating with his Bachelor's in business management. The future was clear. He wanted to be a poker player. The same was true for Joe, who had no other plan in life except to graduate from dealing to playing.

This was the beginning of The Crew. We were all young and had the same goals. To smoke weed and play cards. Great relationships have been built on less.



Our main problem seemed to be each of us was running on very short bankrolls. We were surprisingly forthcoming when talking about our money. The three of us could probably put together only around ten grand.

I had spent enough time as a prop to understand winning at low limit poker is the equivalent of humping a minimum wage job. After putting in a full day at a \$1/2 No-Limit or a \$4/8 Limit Hold'em game, a winning player can really only expect to earn around \$10/hr.

Brett, Joe and I ran down the math together. If I figured on playing five days out of the week, for eight hour days, I'd be looking at an expected win of \$1,600/mo. If I could keep my expenses down to \$40/day, I might be able to increase my bankroll by \$400 every month and hopefully have enough to move up in limits in a year. It sounded abysmal and was frustrating even on paper.

Brett and Joe were both feeling the same frustration. We all were sure we could beat the game, but also understood the reality of our nearly broke situations. We started talking about the old Texas gamblers, like Doyle Brunson, Titanic Thompson, and Sailor Roberts, who would roam around the south playing cash games with combined bankrolls.

If we put our rolls together, we'd have enough to weather the variance in bigger games. We could play \$15/30 Limit, where we could expect to take home three or four times as much than in the lower limit games we were playing. Moreover,

if we set up a cheap home base close to the strip, we could keep expenses lower than if we tried to live on our own.

It sounded like a good idea. The WSOP was coming to a close, with only about a week left of events. Now I had a plan. I'd stick around Vegas, sign a lease with Brett and Joe, and the three of us would attack the games together. With some hard work and luck, we'd be playing WSOP events the following year.



It turned out I wouldn't have to wait a year. The Horseshoe was hosting the last of their mega-satellites, where hundreds of people lined up to enter a \$200 tournament where a dozen people would win Main Event seats in the \$10,000 championship. It was the same line Johnny Hughes had scoffed at the year before. It would overextend my thin bankroll to enter for a chance to play in the Main Event, but I couldn't help myself. I lined up with everyone else and took my shot.

Looking back, I don't think it was a bad decision to play that satellite. True, it was a disaster from a bankroll management point of view. Bankroll management is all about keeping yourself from going broke so you can stay in action indefinitely, and is a vital skill every poker player has to learn in order to survive. I realized that risking five percent of my net worth on a single tournament was a sure recipe for going broke in the long run, but I also realized a sad truth about poker which sinks in deeper every year. When it comes to the World Series of Poker Main Event, there is no long run.

There are fifty chances every summer to win a bracelet, and dozens of tournaments where a player can win a seven figure score, but the Main Event decides the world champion. It's the only tournament that is truly life changing.

Trust me on this. A bracelet doesn't change your life the way you think it will. Neither will a hefty six or seven figure score. It may earn you the fifteen minutes of fame and validation everybody wants, and it will help your status among other poker players. It will probably earn you a page on Wikipedia. Then years later, after the money has dried up (and it always dries up), nobody will really

care. Without many solid follow-ups, you'll be back to broke obscurity before you know it.

The Main Event is different. The Main Event *is* life changing. Unfortunately, it comes only once a year and you won't get a lot of chances at winning it. So generally, you should take every shot you get.

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I won the mega satellite. I'd be playing the most important poker tournament in history on Monday. The day before the Main Event, I took the day off. Rebekah told me about a party she was invited to at Chip and Karina Jett's house. I hadn't left Fremont for two weeks, so when she asked if I'd like to tag along, I jumped at the chance to get away from the casinos.

When we arrived, Chip had a World Poker Tour episode playing from his Tivo on a big screen television in his living room. He had just taken second to Howard Lederer in a WPT event a few weeks before. It was the Party Poker Million, which was a Limit Hold'em event played on a cruise ship. Chip's event wouldn't air until the next month, but he had all of the WPTs which had aired on his DVR.

I took a spot on the couch next to a young poker dealer named Scott Fischman. We didn't say much. We just sat next to each other, completely absorbed by the television show. It was the World Poker Finals and was the first time either one of us had seen hole-card cameras. We watched Lederer navigate his way through a tough final table, consisting of Layne Flack, Andy Bloch, and Phil Ivey.

As soon as it was over, we started the next episode. Outside, Chip and Karina were hosting what was probably the wildest party I'd been to, but Scott and I couldn't tear ourselves away from the television as we watched David Ulliott and Phil Ivey crush the World Poker Open. Unlike every other tournament I'd watched, this time I could see exactly what players were raising and folding with. Hole-card cameras were going to change the game.

The hole-card camera was invented by a Holocaust survivor named Henry Orenstein. He was the same guy who was responsible for bringing Transformers to America. Orenstein was also a bracelet winner, taking down a Stud event in 1995. The introduction of those tiny cameras would make poker a spectator sport.



I was staying at the Nevada Hotel, which was across the street from Binion's. The next morning, I woke up at ten and crossed the street for a light breakfast at the Horseshoe Cafe. Over steak and eggs, I studied the tournament structure. Then I roamed the casino floor waiting for the Main Event to start. I spent a few minutes standing in front of the Wall of Champions, staring at the photos of the past winners. I visualized my own picture on the wall.

When the tournament started and I was sitting at my first day's table, I scanned the other seats for familiar faces. I saw three. In the eight seat and the ten seat sat David Sklansky and T.J. Cloutier. These were the two men who wrote what were at the time the best books on poker since Brunson's *Super System*. The other familiar face was Huai Zhang, known as HZ at the regular Garden City \$20/40 game, who sat directly to my right. Of all the weekend regulars in San Jose, Huai Zhang was the best player in the club.

I played incredibly tight poker for the first several hours. My starting stack of 10,000 dwindled to 8,500. I wasn't concerned. Instead, I was completely focused on every move my opponents made, every hand they played. I treated the event like it was the most important thing I'd ever done.

When the antes hit, I came alive with constant re-raises and blind steals. If I had a playable hand, I would put the last raise in before the flop. Most of the time, I'd take the pot right then and there. When an opponent would call and see a flop, usually a continuation bet would do the trick. I don't remember knocking anybody out, but my stack kept growing steadily without any major confrontations.

At the beginning of the last level, the tournament director broke our table and moved us to new seats in the Bullpen. As we racked our chips for the walk, Huai said something to me.

“You’re playing good, Dutch. You might even take it down. Just remember. If you win this event, you’ll have a thousand new friends. But if you lose, you cry alone.”

I wished him luck, but Huai busted out before the end of the next level. A record field of 839 people played five levels on the first day. Ten hours of poker flew by quicker than a movie. At the end of the day, Barry Greenstein led the field with close to 100,000 in chips. Sammy Farha was in 3rd, Phil Ivey was in 4th, and an unknown Chris MoneyMaker was in the 11th spot with 60,475 chips, just a hair above Scotty Nguyen.

I finished the day in 95th place with 28,750 tournament chips. I had played nearly the whole day with the two players who had written the books on poker, and I was able to bag more chips than Sklansky and Cloutier combined.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

I started my second day at the same table as Cory Zeidman, Annie Duke and David “Devilfish” Ulliott. I played the same game plan as the first day, liberally raising and re-raising. I raised nearly every time it was folded to me on the button or the cutoff. The aggression worked. The day flew by quicker than the first. At the end of the day, Amir Vahedi was leading the pack with 303k. Phil Ivey was sixth with 163k. I stared at my stack of 144k in tournament chips, which was good for 10th.

As I was bagging my chips, Amarillo Slim strolled up to my table holding a small notebook in his hand. He introduced himself and asked my name. “How many chips do you have there?” I told him. Then he asked how long I’ve been playing poker. He explained he had made a prop bet where he’d be picking fifteen players versus the field to win the event. I gave him my short history. “Well, I’m picking you as one of my horses, so try to win.” I started to think I might have a shot at taking the whole thing down.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

In the Main Event, it doesn't take long for the cream to rise. Every single one of the players at my third day starting table was a pro. It was a big change from the first two days of the tournament, where the majority of the seats were filled with hopeful amateurs. At this table, they all had nicknames.

The only unknown player was David Alimi, who was a professional cash game player in France. Alimi was sandwiched between Chip Jett and the runner-up from the 2002 Main Event, Julian "The Kid" Gardner. Also seated were Chris "The Armenian Express" Grigorian, Dennis "Swami" Waterman, and David "Vegas Stud" Grey (all accomplished players). Jimmy Miller was known more as a tournament director. He was in charge of the Hustler Club's Grand Slam series and had been hired on at Binion's with Matt Savage for the summer to run the WSOP tournaments. These days, he wouldn't be able to play the same event he was working, but back then Binion's was fairly lax about potential conflicts of interest.

The chip leader at my table was "Minneapolis" Jim Meehan, who had won his first bracelet earlier in the series. Meehan led the table with 148k, and I was right on his heels.



I remembered the quote Melissa Hayden said to me about not overestimating the pros. She said they were all scared little boys inside. They didn't look scared. They looked like sharks. It was going to be a tough battle.

I decided to revise my strategy. I still stuck with my plan of barraging the table with a constant stream of preflop raises and re-raises, but that day I decided to standardize everything about the way I would raise preflop. These guys were fast company and I was convinced they could pick up on any tells I'd be careless enough to give them. So I made the best effort I could to play a style Joey would later call "the robot". My goal was to make each action I took appear uniform.

I waited until it was my turn before looking at my cards. Then I would lift the edges for exactly three seconds, counting in my head as I peeked. One. Two. Three. I took deep, slow breaths as I replaced my cards to the felt, trying my best to move through this routine the same way every time. Then I would take a seven count while I decided what action to take.

If it had been folded to me in late position (button, cutoff, or hijack), I'd usually raise unless I had some reason to suspect a player behind me had woken up with a strong hand. I raised exactly the same amount preflop regardless of position or hand strength. Three times the big blind. If I was re-raising, I'd make it triple the amount the raiser had put in. Each time, I would announce my raise in a low monotone voice I hoped was consistent.

I started noticing bet-sizing tells from Jimmy Miller and Chip Jett. Both had obviously played a strong aggressive game to get this far into the tournament. They were constantly taking stabs at the pot preflop. After a few rounds, however, I noticed the amounts they were raising relative to the blinds seemed to vary. The different amounts had to mean something.

I noticed it first with Chip, who seemed to be raising more preflop with hands that couldn't stand a raise. He had gone to showdown and won with one of the premium hands (AK, JJ+), which he had raised with for 3x the big blind. The next time he made it 4x the big blind, I re-raised, going through the mechanical procedure I just described. He folded and I took it down without a flop. An

orbit later he made a 5x raise from under the gun. Everyone folded to me on the button.

I didn't even look at my hand before raising. I pretended to look, as it would obviously lead to trouble if anybody remaining noticed I hadn't peeked at my cards. It didn't matter what I'd see. I had decided to raise with anything, but was worried if I glanced down at 7-2 offsuit I'd lose my nerve. So I raised blind.

"Looks like I'm your whipping boy," Chip said, as he folded pocket nines face up on the table.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

I finished Day 3 with the second largest stack. Bruno Fitoussi, a French architect turned pro player, was leading the field with 687k. I was sitting comfortably with 491k, right above Scotty Nguyen and Phil Hellmuth. There were only 45 players left. Five tables. The Bullpen was thick with the nervous tension of the four dozen players still chasing the dream. We'd be playing down to the final nine the next day.

As we bagged our chips, one of the ESPN producers came to my table and introduced himself as Dave Swartz. He asked if I'd come in the next day before play started for a feature interview. We scheduled a time.

The gravity of what we were doing in Vegas began to sink in. Every reporter with a notebook on the rail represented thousands of readers. Every ESPN cameraman represented millions of viewers.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

"Never answer the question that is asked of you. Answer the question that you wish had been asked of you."

Robert McNamara

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

“Look directly at me, not at the camera. I’ll ask you some questions. But I won’t be on television, so when you answer, try to incorporate the question so the audience will be able to follow along.”

I was wearing a wireless mic, sitting under a pair of floodlights at a poker table which had been dragged into the cleared-out Binion’s hotel room ESPN had converted into a television set. I was tired. I spent too much time the night before trying to come up with clever sound bites and material.

We went through the standard interview questions you can imagine. First the ESPN interviewer asked about my background. Then what I’d call “fluff” questions. What is so special about the Main Event? What would winning mean to me? What do I think of such-and-such player? Boring.

The trick to doing a good television interview is to remember a couple things.

First, the person asking the questions is really just trying to get you to open up. They are fishing for a few good quotes. It’s not so important to answer the questions they ask. It’s more important to give them quality moments to capture on film.

Second, remember everything you say is going through the video editing process. There is going to be some dude in front of a laptop, messing with Final Cut Pro or Sony Vegas, clipping a half-hour interview into a handful of five second sound bites they can use. The easier you can make his job, the better it will turn out for you. So speak clearly and put slight pauses at the end of every sentence to make it easier for them to snip the parts they want to use.

After a good forty minutes in front of the camera, it was this sex quote the video editors liked enough to use as the opener for episode five of the 2003 broadcast.

“Poker is a lot like sex. Everyone thinks they’re the best, but most people don’t know what they’re doing.”

Dutch Boyd

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

I like quotes. I’ve littered this whole book with them so far, and will no doubt continue through the rest of this read. It’s a wonderful thing to be able to condense a tiny thought nugget into a sentence or two. And quotes are, by their very nature, formulaic and unoriginal.

Probably my favorite poker quote is by Robert Williamson III. “Poker’s a day to learn and a lifetime to master.” I think it’s hilarious. A similar quote has been attributed to Mike Sexton, who said “poker takes a minute to learn and a lifetime to master.” Put aside the debate of whether it takes closer to a single minute or a full day to learn the rules of poker. Let’s focus on originality.

It may be both Williamson and Sexton adapted the quote from Philip Kotler, who said that “*marketing* takes a day to learn and a lifetime to master.” They might have all ripped the quote from the copy on Mattel’s Othello game box, which claims that Othello is “the game that takes a minute to learn and a lifetime to master.” Or perhaps it’s from the US Chess Federation’s site which says... well, you get the point.

My quote has shown up on more “top poker quotes” collections than I care to count. And it’s every bit as lacking in originality as the Williamson and Sexton quotes. I first read something along the same lines in Andy Bellin’s book *Poker Nation*, who no doubt adapted it from something he heard at the tables. Maybe that guy adapted it from Richard Feynman, who said “physics is like sex,” followed by something funny. Or Virginia Woolf, who said it about writing.

The quote is formulaic and works for anything. X is like sex because Y. Hilarious.

Five million people and counting have heard that quote and attributed it to me because of a single sentence I said in a half hour interview. But I’ll take credit

for the sex quote, even though it's not original, partly because I doubt anybody has said it exactly the same way, mostly because nobody has said it as loud.



Huai Zhang was wrong about crying alone. When Moneymaker and Farha delivered their collective one-two punch, knocking me out in 12th place in spectacular fashion and splitting my chipleader stack between them, there would be no crying. The ESPN cameras followed me out of the Bullpen, perhaps hoping for liquid grief. They'd have to wait until the following year to get the first poker tears on camera, when they immortalized Mike Matusow crying into his hands after suffering a brutal three-outer on a final table river. In the years since, we've seen Phil Hellmuth, Matt Affleck, Andrew Feldman, and Adam Friedman all join the poker crying club.

I've never cried over a poker loss, but I can understand how someone could. At the end of a deep run in a big event, you are an odd mixture of worn-out excitement. You see the path to victory, your future as a champion, so clear and so close. There is a confidence that builds. This is going to be your year. This is going to be your time. This is going to be your dream come true.

When a poker dream shatters, something breaks inside. You are left hollow and numb, and weirdly relieved that the constant tension faced over the last several days is finally over. You can at last let down your guard and go back to normal life, where you aren't surrounded by enemies all trying to take your tournament life away. You get a little, sometimes a lot, of money in your pocket. But nowhere near as much as you left on the table. It's a bittersweet feeling and the body reacts how it wants to.

So I don't see it as weakness per se when other players react to their bustouts and bad beats by crying. I wouldn't justify it as an estimable reaction, but it's at least excusable. As the old poker saying goes: show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser.



I did see one guy cry at the poker table where it was completely justified. It was during a \$300 buy-in event at the Commerce in Los Angeles. One of the players at my table, a big loud Greek, was sitting across from me in the five seat and had just knocked out an older player from the tournament. The older player sulked away to the wall, where a couple coffeemakers had been set up to keep the players in caffeine. He walked past our table with a fresh cup of scalding hot coffee, and poured it down the Greek's back.

The Greek didn't see it coming, none of us did, and the large man stood up and let out a scream of pain. The older player walked quickly out of the tournament room, literally whistling as he tried to look casual. At first, security was confused, and they started running towards the Greek guy, naturally assuming he was the problem. He continued to scream, and then he stripped off his shirt.

We all saw the bright red burn mark covering his back. Blisters were already starting to form. It happened so fast, but a few of the players at the table put together what happened and several of us pointed to the perpetrator skipping away. We shouted orders to the security guards. "Stop that guy! That guy over there!" Which they did.

The tournament director stopped the clock for a few minutes while the chaos was put to order. Police and paramedics showed up. The older player left the casino in handcuffs and the Greek left in an ambulance. The tournament resumed and they blinded off the Greek's chips.

Before the Greek left the table, and after his screams had stopped, tears welled up in his eyes and he started to cry. This remains the only time in my poker career I've ever seen someone cry at the poker table where I felt it was completely 100% justified.



When my 2003 Main Event came to a close, Joey and Brett were watching from the sidelines and gave the mixture of congratulations and condolences that comes with an in-the-money finish where you leave a lot of money on the table.

Only a stranger to poker would treat a 12th place finish in the championship event as a win.

It was a lot of money, though. I officially cashed for \$80k, which was more than I'd ever seen. Anybody watching this at home, after coming home from a job they hated and getting paid a fraction of my score for a year's worth of work, would have to consider it a windfall. I felt like any complaining or negativity could easily make me look like an asshole.

So as I walked out of Benny's Bullpen, and the ESPN cameras followed, I sucked in all the disappointment and tried to look as happy as I could. Brett and Joey waited to take their cue. I raised my hand to give them both a high-five. Smiling through the bitterness, I tried to look like a winner.

"Eighty THOUSAND dollars! We're going to take over the poker world!"

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Life Lesson #29
Always smile for the camera.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Eighty thousand turned into less than seventy before I even cashed it out. I had made a 2% swap with Jimmy Miller on Day Three. I have no idea why I agreed to this, as I had triple the chips Miller had when he suggested the deal. Just one of a long list of bad decisions I made during the tournament.

After Miller had been knocked out, he put on a suit and resumed duties as a floor person. When it came time to collect my win, Miller led me to a large redheaded floor named Bonnie Damiano who was in charge of processing cashouts. Then he left, and Bonnie started pulling out forms to sign.

There was an unremarkable, middle-aged man standing next to her. Bonnie introduced him and said that for 5%, he would assume the tax liability. Then she shoved a form in front of me I'd recognize today as a Form 5754. She was

very friendly, as well as more than a little pushy, as she encouraged me to sign the form.

Looking back, this was almost certainly a crime. I didn't know this guy (still don't), and yet there I was, about to sign a form saying he was my backer in order to save tens of thousands of dollars in taxes. It's something I never would have considered, had it not been for the adamant insistence of Bonnie. She made it clear this was the way it was done, saying that the same guy had signed for most of the other players.

Spending three years in law school, I obviously should have known better than to just sign whatever someone put in front of me. But after busting out of the Main Event, I really wasn't in a mood to argue. I just wanted out of there and I wanted my money. So I signed her forms.

Her mood instantly changed as she started counting out stacks of hundred dollar bills. She went from warm and friendly to brisk and curt quicker than aces get cracked on the turn. I was expecting to get \$76,000, after giving her "backer" a five percent cut. Instead, she stopped at \$67,900 and handed it over to me.

"Where's the other eight grand?"

Bonnie handed over a piece of paper with a signature on it.

"I'm holding \$1,600 for Jim's 2%, and I'm holding \$6,500 for a debt you owe two of my friends."

I looked at the piece of paper she had given me. It was a handwritten note which said, "This document signifies that Russell Boyd has paid back the \$6,500 owed to me from Pokerspot in full." Then it had a signature from a name I didn't recognize.

I started to protest.

"That's not right. You can't just take my money."

She gave me a smug look and held up the backer form I had just signed, then gestured to the middle aged man who was still there.

“I don’t have to give you anything. I could just give all the money to your backer here.”

I stopped talking and just stared at her for a few seconds. She had hustled me and I didn’t see anything I could do about it. I put the \$67,900 into a backpack and walked out of Benny’s Bullpen.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Bobby and I grabbed a few beers downstairs from the Bullpen after I cashed out. He had booked a flight to come watch the tournament, and was still in the air an hour outside of Vegas when I lost my last hand. He arrived in time to listen to my exit story and seemed almost as disappointed as I was with the 12th place finish.

“So what’s the plan now?”

I didn’t know. I sat awhile at the bar, nursing a Heineken with my little brother, thinking about the answer. To a lot of people, a high finish in the WSOP is the end of a chapter. They take the money and return to their normal life, business as usual. I had a small fortune slung around my back, and the weight didn’t feel like the end of something. It felt like a beginning.

I had a plan before I won my way into the Main Event: share a place with Joey and Brett and grind up a bankroll. Now, holding a backpack full of money, the original plan didn’t make a lot of sense. It was time to think bigger.

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I hate to admit it, but part of the inspiration for The Crew came from Lou Pearlman and his boy bands from the nineties. The middle-aged, grossly obese con-man/entrepreneur was the man who created the bands Backstreet Boys, N’Sync, 98 Degrees, and O-Town, among others.

Pearlman is serving hard time in a federal pen for a Ponzi scheme now, which had begun even before he stumbled upon the successful boy band formula he had repeated so many times. According to a *Vanity Fair* article, Pearlman's success with boy bands was a complete fluke, and was the unexpected consequence of Pearlman's desire to get blowjobs from teenage boys.

The groups together sold hundreds of millions of records, almost all of which went into Pearlman's pockets. Regardless of how it ended, and the mess Lou Pearlman's made of his own life, those boy bands make a pretty good case that the sum of a group's parts can be much more than the individuals themselves.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

The formula seemed good. Put five marketable, personable boys together into a group. Build a brand. Instead of singing, we'd play poker tournaments. When one of us hit something, the rest would get credit. The combination of accomplishments would be more impressive than any individual accomplishments we could build on our own. We were confident if we could blow ourselves up, there would be plenty of money to go around.

Like most of my life's adventures, I didn't want to start without my little brother. So I asked Bobby if he wanted to be a part of The Crew. It was an easy sell. He was tired of working real jobs, and decided to give it a shot. Joey and Brett were eager to start something, so they were both in. We needed one more person to reach the magical number I had in my head.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

I was already working on a pretty good beer buzz with my brother when Rebekah Sindoris joined us at the Binion's bar, along with her cameraman David Smythe (aka "Dorf"). I had clicked pretty well with Dorf the few times we'd hung out in Vegas and LA, and he had been following Rebekah everywhere with a camera for a year. He understood the poker scene and was always fun to hang around. And at the risk of sounding cliché, he had star quality.

Dorf's ambition was to be a writer. He had moved out to LA with a degree and a few television scripts in hand hoping to hit it big. Instead he was holding a camera for less than minimum wage. It didn't take much to convince him to give poker a try.

We had our fifth player. Myself, Joey Bartholdi, Brett "Gank" Jungblut, Bobby Boyd, and now David "Dorf" Smythe. We were officially a poker crew.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

The five of us met that night to talk about the plan for our new poker boy-band. Our direction was uncertain, but we felt like the place to be was Vegas or Los Angeles. Both seemed to have their pros and cons. Vegas had the WSOP and tourist dollars, while LA had better weather and a cooler feel to it. Vegas was cheaper, but the LA games were better. Joey was the only one who was really pushing Vegas as the home base for The Crew. Gank and Dorf were both pushing for LA. Bobby and I didn't really care, so we collectively decided for Hollywood.

We'd be leaving after the Main Event was over. Rebekah wanted to hang out long enough to see who would win the tournament upstairs in the Bullpen. She was there taping the last moments of the tournament which would go on to change poker forever, as Chris Moneymaker took down the title.

I probably should have been alongside her watching poker history unfold, but I couldn't bare to watch. It still felt like my tournament. Watching someone else win it would have been like watching the wedding of an ex-girlfriend you still weren't over.

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The Crew still didn't have a name. As we packed everything we owned into two cars, the main thing the five of us debated was what we were going to call ourselves. How many times has that scene played out? Like co-authors coming up for the name of their movie before a line is written, or a new band shooting

down name ideas before a single song has been recorded. The names were all over the place.

Some of the early contenders I remember were High Society, The Grinders, The Rounders, High Rollers, Five of a Kind, and plenty of others equally lame. What were we going to call the crew? We all had our own ideas of what the answer should be.

In the end, we decided we should play for the naming rights. When we rolled into LA, five homeless poker players couch-surfing in Rebekah's small apartment, our first priority wasn't scouring the online classifieds for a house to rent. It was playing out a poker tournament to determine who was going to be in charge of naming our group.

We made the stack sizes super deep. The blind levels moved up at a snail's pace. It took around four hours for Dorf to end up with all the chips. The whole time, Rebekah was there with her camera, videotaping the process.

Dorf ended up headsup with Brett, and ended up winning it with pocket kings. As he scooped up the final chip, he looked around the other members of the crew and began to smile.

"I think I've got the perfect name, guys." Dorf's smile grew even wider as we leaned in. "I think I'm going to name the crew... 'We're Not All Gay.'"

Our collective mouths dropped, and there was an uncomfortable silence between Bobby, Joey, Brett and me. Dorf just started laughing, and repeated his perfect name. He stressed the "all" part of his title (we're not ALL gay!), and laughed even harder the more any of us objected. At the time, I didn't see the humor in it.

I think it's hilarious, now. Five guys in a room, none of us really knowing each other well at all, looking around at each other suspiciously wondering what the hell we had signed up for.

CHAPTER NINE

The Card Castle

“There’s no success like failure.”

Bob Dylan

The Crew spent an entire day looking on Craigslist for a house to rent. Five unemployed, permastoned, fraternity-aged boys with a combined credit score hovering in at two thousand, looking for a place to live in Los Angeles. Preferably a furnished five bedroom near Santa Monica. We only looked at one place. It was the bottom floor of a huge house in Culver City, owned by a stuntman named Tom who lived in the upper floor. It was perfect.

Tom brought out the application forms and started talking details, asking the questions you’d expect a landlord to ask. He seemed less than enthusiastic when he asked what we did for a living and we filled him in on our plan to take over the poker world. He was in the middle of turning us down when I mentioned we could pay for the first six months up front. In cash.

Tom put away the application forms and brought out a lease.

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Life Lesson #30

There is a certain freedom to being able to fit everything you own into a bag... especially when you have large wads of hundred dollar bills in that bag.

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Brett and Dorf both had roots in Southern California, and both had several non-poker friends who would hang out at our poker base. A number of poker players would also stop in from time to time. Our door was always open, and we always had a big sack of weed ready to roll into joints and pass around the living room. A lot of people came through that house.

Phil Laak was playing quite a bit in the cash games at Commerce and would constantly couch-surf in what was probably an effort to save money on Gardena hotel rooms. It was Laak who gave the house its official moniker. He called it the Card Castle.



One of Brett's buddies who hung around the Card Castle was named Mitch. He was super-likable, always smiling and joking around. Mitch could blow the best smoke rings I've ever seen. At least once a day, we'd ask him to show off his trick, and he would impress everyone with a smoke ring as big as a donut, so thick it was almost opaque. It always reminded me of Antonio's anti-gravity chip trick, and I thought about how many Marlboro packs Mitch must have gone through to perfect that skill.

I asked Mitch once if his smoke rings were the best he, himself, had ever seen. He smiled and shook his head.

"No. One time I blew one of my rings in a bar out east and this old guy came up next to me and said, 'That's pretty good, kid. But watch this.' This guy took two big drags on his cigarette, and let out a ring just as thick and twice the size as mine. And then he licked his middle finger and his thumb like this. And he snapped his fingers over the ring... and it turned into a HEART!"



Phil Laak loved counting his money at the Card Castle. It didn't matter who was there, who might be watching. He'd plop on our couch, pull out big rubber-banded wads of hundred dollar bills, and start counting out five, ten, fifteen grand on the coffee table.

He'd actually say it. "I love counting money!" Then he'd launch into a long spiel about how he'd raped some donkey at the Commerce. I don't remember him ever telling a bad beat. Every one of his stories which started with a strong hand always ended up with him felting another player. I always liked that about Phil. No bad beat stories.

One morning, after crashing at the Card Castle, Phil woke up and discovered one of his \$5k wads missing. He flipped out, and was absolutely sure it had been stolen. His brain started working out the possibilities, the probabilities, the numbers. Phil came up with a conclusion. Mitch had stolen his money.

Brett stuck up for his buddy. He insisted Phil was wrong and it couldn't have been Mitch. The two had known each other for several years, and Mitch was a stand-up guy. Absolutely jake. Brett suggested that maybe he had misplaced it, or had miscounted the night before. But Phil was certain. It was Mitch.

Phil had Brett call our house buddy and ask if he had seen the money. Brett did, and Mitch acted like he had no idea anything was wrong. Phil saw right through the act, and started thinking about what his options were. Then, after about two hours of complete tilt, Phil found the missing money. He had put it in a rarely used pocket in his backpack the night before.

Nobody had stolen from him. Phil just had a brain melt and forgotten where he'd put his cash after counting it out. I don't remember him ever counting his bankroll in front of us after that happened.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Looking forward a few years later, a very similar thing would happen with another buddy of mine crashing on my couch: Johnny Monnette. Today, Monnette is one of the most successful poker players in the world. He plays the highest stakes games at the Aria, and is a big winner there. A few years ago, he started dabbling in tournaments (even though he insists the money is in cash games), and as of this sentence Monnette has already taken down two bracelets. I'm sure he'll take down more.

Before he became the powerhouse player he is today, Monnette was just like any other unknown grinder with an ego bigger than his bankroll. In 2005, two years after Phil Laak was convinced Mitch stole his money, Monnette was couch-surfing at my house in Vegas with Darin during the WSOP. Another former friend of mine, a broke hustler named Justin Myers, was taking the guest room.

Johnny was in a coma after pulling a very late low-limit grind session. When he woke up, he was horrified to find out a grand had been stolen from his backpack. Monnette accused Justin of taking the money, and I was just as sure as Brett had been about Phil that Monnette was way off base. I figured it was another case of a tired and tilted poker player forgetting how much money he had, or where he had stashed his roll. Justin insisted he was innocent, and invited us all to go through his things if we didn't believe he was flat broke. We did.

We didn't find any money. What we did find was a safety deposit box key for one of the casinos and a receipt. He had opened it up early that morning, right around the time Monnette was sleeping and his cash went missing.

Justin stole that money from Monnette. I'm practically sure of it now. But before we found his box key, I would have bet my roll against Justin taking it. By letting him stay in my house, I implicitly vouched for him to everyone else. It wouldn't be the last time I vouched for the wrong guy.

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Back to 2003. Los Angeles. Culver City. The Card Castle. The five of us got together a few days after moving into our new house to come up with our plan. We setup an office in one of our rooms, along with a few whiteboards. Together we started going over the crew finances and figuring out how we'd make the bankroll grow.

We started with \$25,000, taken out of my Main Event score. Right off the top, \$15k was taken off for the next six months of rent. So we had a crew bankroll

of \$10k. The plan was to play online cash games. The details of our crew plan are kind of hazy now, but I remember it looking something like this.

Each crew member would start with two grand in their PokerStars account. We'd each shoot for a minimum of 5,000 hands a week, playing \$2/4 Limit Hold'em. Once we individually made a profit of \$500 at the \$2/4 stakes, we'd move up to \$3/6 Limit and keep grinding until we made a profit of \$1,000. Then we'd move up to \$5/10 Limit and grind a \$2,000 profit, then move up again and grind at \$10/20 Limit until we made a profit of \$5,000. At that point, we could play whatever we wanted. But if, when rising up the poker levels, we were ever down at a certain limit more than we were up in the one below, we'd have to step down and start again at the level directly below what we were playing.

We'd take 50% of the profits every week and add it to the crew bankroll. The other 50% would be distributed between the five of us. Half of the distribution would be paid out equally, the other half would be paid out according to who had actually won that week. So, for example, if Brett had a crazy good week of grinding \$10/20 Limit Hold'em and won \$10,000, while everybody else broke exactly even, \$5k would be added to the crew bankroll, \$2,500 would be distributed evenly between the five of us for \$500/each, and \$2,500 would be distributed to Brett.

If we stuck to our crew plan, we figured we'd be able to grind the crew bankroll up to \$50k in two or three months, at which point I'd take back the \$25k I had put up to begin the roll, and we'd continue making money together as a crew.

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Even before we started putting in hands, there was tension. Brett and Joe were convinced they'd be winning more than Bobby and Dorf, and didn't like the idea of anybody profiting when they weren't making money. Brett wanted to focus more on tournaments. Joe wanted to focus more on live games.

I was convinced playing live would lead to distrust and potentially worse, outright stealing, since live couldn't really be tracked. I was also convinced cash

games were the better way to make the bankroll grow, rather than tournaments. Tournaments had an incredible amount of variance, and it was far easier to see and fix leaks in cash games.

Joe made a good case for live play, which is a richer game than grinding out in front of a computer screen. The whole point of being in Vegas or LA was to be in a place where live poker was going on. If we weren't going to be playing live, what was the point of being in Los Angeles? The average fish in a live casino is several magnitudes worse than the average fish in an online environment. It takes a minimum level of competence to own a computer, have the ability to download poker software, and get money into the online sites. Whereas, a player in a live casino just has to be able to park their car or ride a bus.

Brett made a good case for focusing on tournaments. The whole point of the crew was to increase exposure, and tournaments were the only way to really do that. In the future, we saw corporate money coming in. Sponsorship of the crew would only happen if we were putting up tournament numbers that could be tracked by the rest of the world.

Since it was my money, I had a little more say in the direction of where we were going, but I tried to keep it as much a democracy as possible. Even so, the crew game plan was basically my idea and any vote was a sham, since Dorf and Bobby generally deferred to my opinion. So the crew decided to focus on online cash games. They were juicy and they could scale.

We made concessions to keep Brett and Joe happy. As long as we put in our 5,000 hands a week on crew money, we could play whatever we wanted on our own bankrolls. If we wanted to play live, we could. If we wanted to play tournaments, we could. Anything we won or lost in live cash games or tournaments was ours alone.



The crew game plan didn't work. It failed miserably.

I think Dorf was the first one to make it out of the \$2/4 level, which surprised everyone. But then, after a bad run at \$3/6, he was back to the \$2/4 grind. For my part, I remember making it to the \$5/10 level in the first three weeks. Then I stalled out and had to go back down to \$3/6.

After every session, we'd write our numbers on the whiteboard. We all watched the board as our crew bankroll began to shrink week after week. It was frustrating, and led to some arguments and shouting matches.

I don't remember there ever being a week where the combined wins of the group outweighed the combined losses. Not a single crew distribution. As a result, everybody was pushed into making money individually.

Brett and Joe started playing live tournaments around town. Eventually, we each started missing our goal of 5,000 hands a week. I was probably the first one to miss it, then Brett. Eventually, everybody missed it. Without any sort of penalty, and with no distributions forthcoming, there wasn't much motivation to stick with the crew game plan and put in the hands we had committed to.

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At the end of July, Phil was thinking about taking a vacation around the Caribbean, and asked if I wanted to go. I'm a sucker for a beach, always have been, so it didn't take much to convince me to join. I brought along Bobby and the three of us flew down to Mexico, then spent a week and a half island hopping in the gulf. It was on one of those islands that I watched myself bust out of the Main Event on ESPN.

Towards the end of our trip, I was sitting on a beach reading a Kurt Vonnegut book, *Sirens of Titan*, when Bobby got an email from Dorf. He told us Brett and Joe had played a tournament down at the Hustler Club's Grand Slam of Poker. It was a \$100 event with more than 350 entrants. They had finished first and second, earning around \$20k between the two of them.

The chances of that happening are pretty slim. I ran some numbers with Phil there on the beach and figured the chances were at least 50,000 to 1 for the two of them to take those top two spots. It seemed nothing short of a miracle.

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We all see what we want to see. Even though Brett and Joe's win would fall under the category of "individual play", and their win wouldn't affect the crew bankroll at all, I was convinced the unlikely first and second place finish was a sign from the universe that the crew was destined for greatness, and we were on the right path.

This was the kind of magical thinking that sparked manic episodes and irrational choices. It's easy to assign meaning to an occurrence when you look at the chances of that individual thing happening. The tournament finish was what Nassim Taleb, author of *Fooled By Randomness*, might call a "black swan" event. The occurrence actually meets all three prongs of Taleb's test of whether something can be considered a black swan. It was (1) a surprise that (2) had a major effect and (3) could be rationalized in hindsight as if it could have been expected.

I don't believe in signs anymore. I've learned that while the chances of a single something improbable happening might be astronomical (i.e. the chances of any single black swan event occurring is small), the chances of **something** improbable happening is practically certain. To put it another way, the odds of winning the lottery may be very small, but the chances of somebody out there winning is very good. Indeed, it happens every week, and few watch it happen and automatically assume a miracle. Except the people who win it.

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Life Lesson #31

A black swan doesn't mean anything.

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So it ended up being long-time poker player and journalist Max Shapiro, rather than Dorf, who gave The Crew its name. Max is a staple in the poker world. He's married to Barbara Enright, who as I write this is still the last woman to make it to the final table of the WSOP Main Event. For over 20 years, Max reported on poker tournaments for Card Player and a number of other poker publications.

It was his report of the Grand Slam event which gave our poker boy-band the name that stuck. When he asked Joe and Brett what the name of our group was, they told him we hadn't gotten around to naming the crew... we had always just called it "the crew". He wrote up the tournament report, and the unofficial name became the official name.

Shapiro's tournament report looked like this:

Two Young Poker 'Crew' Members Play First Event; Finish One-Two

Look out, here comes "The Crew." A few months ago, six young poker players, five men and a woman aged 21-25, bursting with energy and enthusiasm, decided to get together, move to L.A., room together, share their knowledge and live-game bankrolls, shoot for corporate sponsorship and help revolutionize poker. Tonight three of them entered their first live tournament as "Crew" members, in the 19th event of Hustler Casino's Grand Slam of Poker, \$100 no-limit Hold'em. When it was over, one was first and one was second.

When they got heads-up, Joe Bartholdi had a chip lead of about 4-3 over Brett Jungblut. After a few hands, Bartholdi still had a slight lead, and the tournament ended right there, but they planned to play for the trophy when they got home. This is the biggest tournament win for Bartholdi, a former Binion's dealer who's 23 and has been playing as a pro for five years. Previously, he had won a couple of the Mirage's daily events. Another member of the Crew (a name they came up with on the spot after the event ended) is "Dutch Boy," who finished 12th in this year's World Series championship. Also on hand was a lady with a mini-cam who hopes to get enough footage out of the Crew to eventually put together a documentary.

A door-busting crowd of 352 players showed up for this \$25,000 guaranteed event, and to accommodate them, there were 10 players to a table and 11 tables with 19. Opening limits at the final table were \$5,000 and \$10,000. Bartholdi, down to \$2,000 at one point, eventually went in four times and survived before going on to a win...

Bartholdi was now leading about 400k-300k. Four hands later, after his lead had narrowed down to 360-345k, the two called a truce. The Crew now had its first major trophy, and everything seems to indicate that the poker world should hear a lot more about these young poker adventurers in the months and years to come.

--*Max Shapiro*

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When Bobby and I got back from island hopping with the Unabomber, morale was high with the Crew. Brett and Joey felt unstoppable after their score, and their online hand counts began to drop. I was no better. My own weekly hand count had fallen close to zero. The three of us started slipping into a trap I see a lot of tournament players find themselves stuck in: the one where they'd rather be poker players than actually play poker.

When you hit a tournament score, it's easy to stop thinking about poker as a long-term game, where each hand you play is going to be worth a specific (and pitifully small) amount. A big tournament win will fool you into thinking your hands are worth dollars instead of pennies. This is true whether you are playing tournaments or cash games, but is much easier to forget with big tournament scores.

Don't get me wrong. Cash game players aren't immune to this trap. A good week or month or year at the cash game tables can easily make a cash player think he is making hundreds an hour multi-tabling higher stakes games. While that might be true for the short-term, it doesn't take into account the tens or hundreds of thousands of hands leading up to the point where a player can

beat the higher stakes games for triple digit figures, and also doesn't take into account that the day will come when those games disappear.

I'll stay away from spending too much time talking specifics about bankroll management. Suffice it to say that every successful poker player I know shares one thing in common. They play a hell of a lot of hands. The minute a player starts thinking it's ok to stop playing, they go down the road to broke. As a crew, we were going down that road at a breakneck speed.

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The road to broke is a fun ride, especially when you're taking it with a few frat-boy buddies. For the whole summer, every day started with a joint and a beer. Every meal was pizza, or In-n-Out. Our Playstation 2 was constantly serving up games of Tony Hawk or NBA Streets. There were parties every weekend, and a constant stream of interesting and pretty people coming through the house. And every once in awhile, we'd put in a few hours of poker and lose a little of the crew bankroll.

At the beginning of September, we threw a Labor Day barbecue at the Card Castle. Looking back, I think five professional poker players who hadn't really worked a day all summer celebrating the American labor movement qualifies as situational irony. We made a big deal out of it. We spent a few hundred dollars on hot dogs, hamburgers, and alcohol and invited all of our friends. Rebekah came out with her camera.

I used the party as an excuse to start scouting out a girlfriend. I loaded up Myspace, did a search for 21 to 24-year-old girls with "poker" as a hobby who lived near my zip-code, and sent a message to the handful of pretty pictures.

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It is a hell of a lot easier to pick up a girl if she's seen you on television.

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One of the girls I messaged on Myspace came to our Labor Day party. Her name was Gianna, and she'd end up being my first serious relationship.

Every girlfriend I'd had before lasted at most six months. I had collected a string of short relationships in every city I lived in... St. Louis, Montreal, San Jose, Las Vegas. They were all beautiful, funny, smart, sexy... the whole package. I'd inevitably dump any of them who didn't dump me first. I'd find or makeup some flaw I just couldn't get over. All their elbows were too pointy.

I remember a frat party in Columbia where a boy explained his theory of dating. He explained to me with all seriousness that dating was like a pyramid. Every girl you date gets you closer to the top of the pyramid, where there is the perfect girl waiting for you. It may be one of the dumbest pieces of relationship advice I've ever heard.

I contrast this boneheaded pyramid theory of relationships with something my mom told me. She said relationships are just like people. There is no such thing as a perfect relationship any more than there is a perfect person. Most importantly, she said if you want a romantic relationship to work, to last, to be successful, then you both have to put the relationship first. You have to stop thinking about yourself in the relationship and think in terms of the team. Your relationship team has to be the number one priority in both of your lives, above everything else. Above your family, above your work, above your friends, above your hobbies, above yourself. Above everything.

She gave me that advice after her third divorce to my stepfather Richard, years after Gianna had broken up with me. Gianna and I had a good run. A year and a half of dating, three months of which were fantastic, and six months which were pretty good.

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“Syd: What do you look for in a woman?

Dex: Low standards.”

The Tao of Steve (2000)



Gianna was a trust fund hippie who was living alone in a Culver City house about five minutes from the Card Castle. Her family had done well farming sugar beets in Fresno, and after paying for a liberal arts degree from Loyola, her trust fund was now allowing her to live alone in one of the most expensive cities in the world while she found herself.

She had done a little modeling and had been in a couple music videos. Mostly she spent her time painting, doing drugs, and clubbing in Hollywood hotspots with other trust fund kids. When we met, she was dating an aspiring rockstar who had an obsession with poker. They had been watching every episode of the WSOP coverage together, putting it on her Tivo along with *Smallville* and *Alias*.

Gianna was the kind of girl who was always looking for a black swan. The “everything happens for a reason” mentality is popular with people who have too much time to fill and are searching for meaning in life. So of course Gianna would see it as a Universe signal when, just a week after I had been in her living room on television, I emailed her out of the blue. It couldn’t just be a coincidence that I lived practically down the street.

And of course it wasn’t a coincidence. I had emailed her precisely because she lived so close. I had emailed her precisely because she likely already knew who I was. I had filtered through every girl on Myspace. Millions of girls, sifted like flour.

Gianna was one of three. The other two didn’t come to my party.



The Crew’s labor day barbecue was a success. By the end of the night, the house had gone through a half ounce of weed and a small brewery’s worth of beer. Gianna was sober at the time, so she didn’t drink or smoke with us. Instead, she spent most of the party on the opposite end of Bartholdi’s flirtatious advances. Joey was coming on strong, engaged in a full-court press.

Goofing around, telling stories, lighting fireworks in the street. He was doing everything he could think of to attract the girl, and all he succeeded in doing was placing himself securely and forever in the friend zone.

When she told me she was leaving the party, I asked if I could come along. A few hours later, Gianna and her boyfriend broke up. I spent the rest of the summer at Gianna's house.

We fell in love. We watched *Smallville* and *Alias* on her Tivo every single week.

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“You can never love people as much as you can miss them.”

John Green

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Bobby almost burnt down the Card Castle one night. He had invited an old crush, Jennifer “Jennicide” Leigh, to visit him in Los Angeles. Jennicide would eventually become a solid player in her own right, and earn a fair amount of fame after gracing the cover of *Playboy*.

They had known each other from the old #hack days, and now Jennicide was becoming increasingly interested in poker. Bobby setup a dozen candles in his room one night, trying to set a romantic mood. Things got hot and heavy... hotter still when a candle dropped onto the blanket they were under and set the fabric ablaze. Jennifer ran out of his room, a future *Playmate* half-clothed, and the boys rushed in to help Bobby put out the flames.

I would have loved to see this, but I wasn't there. I only got to hear the story secondhand because I was working on my own flames at my new girlfriend's house. I began to sense a feeling of resentment growing in the Crew the more time I spent with Gianna. I stopped playing altogether, and stopped even asking how the crew bankroll was doing or how the other members were running. I had practically moved in with Gianna and wouldn't come back to the Card Castle for days at a time.

I was drifting away from the boys, and perhaps there was a sense of abandonment there. I had, after all, dragged them all out to LA so we could grow together as poker players. Now I seemed to be casting our dream aside like yesterday's newspaper.

I doubt the resentment ran too deep, though. They were all wrapped up in their own dramas, having their own adventures, probably hardly noticed I was gone. We're all the heroes in our own stories, and I was then and am still just a supporting character in theirs.



A few other noteworthy things happened at the Card Castle while I was comfortably enjoying my new relationship a few miles away.

One of them was this.

Brett, who had been logging quite a few hours in PokerStars tournaments, connected with a backer. This happened on a Saturday. Phil Laak received a call from a friend of his in New York: a hedge fund manager named Eric "Sheets" Haber. Sheets was a family man with kids, one of which had a soccer game he had to drag himself away from a PokerStars tournament to attend. Sheets called Phil, hoping he could take the reigns. But Phil was on his way to another commitment, so he recommended Brett take over. Brett won the thing. This turned out to be pretty fortunate for a lot of people.

As a direct result of Brett's win, Haber got the idea that maybe backing poker players could be a profitable endeavor. He started backing Brett in more tournaments. He would go on to back Brett, Scott Fischman and me for the entirety of the 2004 WSOP. Brett would win a bracelet, Scott would win two bracelets, and I'd take a runner-up in Razz.

Sheets would eventually bring in his hedge fund partner, Cliff "JohnnyBax" Joesphy, and the two would run the largest staking organization the poker world has ever known. They would provide the seed money for hundreds of poker players, dozens of who would transform into some of today's top players. I

would estimate the Sheets-Bax stable of players has been responsible for at least 20 WSOP bracelets, the biggest of which was Joe Cada's Main Event championship in 2009.

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Another noteworthy event was this. I got an emergency call from Bobby one night. It must have been around 8pm on a Thursday. The conversation was quick.

"Bro! Joey's leaving the Crew. You better get over here and talk to him."

"What do you mean he's leaving?"

"I mean he's leaving. He has his shit in a suitcase and I'm outside right now watching him put it into the trunk of a car. He says he's leaving the Crew and going back to Vegas."

"Wait. Hold up. Why didn't you guys try to talk him out of it?"

"We didn't know. I had no idea he was thinking of leaving. He just came out of his room about ten minutes ago with his bags packed and a car already outside waiting for him. He seems upset about something. Brett's flipping out. You should get over here as soon as you can and talk to him."

"Ok. I'll be there in five minutes."

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I still hadn't bothered to buy a car. I had Gianna drive me back over to my place. By the time we got there, Joey was gone. I called him on his cellphone, half expecting it to go to voicemail. But he picked up.

"Oh. Hey Dutch."

“Joey! Whatsup? The guys said you decided to just take off?” A few seconds went by without him saying anything. “What happened?”

“Well...” He trailed off and was silent for a few more moments. It was clear he was about to have a conversation that he didn’t want to have. “I fucked up, man. It’s bad. I don’t even want to say.”

I started running through all the possibilities, all the actions that could cause one of us to leave at a moments notice without so much as a goodbye.

“Well what happened? I’m sure we can get over it.” More silence. Then he explained.

He had been feeling confident after his tournament win and he had a few good days online. He had jumped up. Taken a shot. He started playing \$10/20 Limit online with the Crew bankroll. He hadn’t cleared his goals, and didn’t tell anybody else. He was sure he could make some money. Instead, he blew through all the Crew cash he had in his account. It was a few grand, and cut our bankroll by a good 25%.

Rather than face up to the loss, he had decided to try to dig himself out of the hole using his own roll. He jumped up to \$5/10 No Limit, which was nosebleed stakes to us back then. After losing some buy-ins, he jumped again to \$10/20 NL with the rest of his roll. Within the space of five hours, he had gone from a super confident grinder with a “bankroll on swell” to the I-15 highway, heading back to Downtown Vegas with empty pockets. He was going back to the Horseshoe to resume his life, pre-crew, behind the box dealing cards. He had already called his dad. It would be just like he’d never left.

I find it amusing that most people go to Vegas with gambling dreams, go broke, and go home to their normal dead-end job. Joey was doing the exact opposite... he always did things his own way.

He hadn’t told the other guys what happened. Just that he was leaving. I tried to convince him to stay, but Joey had made up his mind. He was out. He was

gone. I told him he was always welcome to come back, and I'd hit him up next time I was in Vegas. I wished him luck.

When I got off the phone, the other guys gathered around. I told Brett he should probably roll a joint. Then I shared the details and the bad news with the Crew.

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That was a depressing call. It was a depressing day. Joey was part of the Crew from the very start, part of the soul. Joey would be fine. We all would be fine. We'd have wins, blow through them, have losses, get through them. But when Joey left the Card Castle, something fundamentally changed. His departure was a stark reminder that in the end, the Crew was just like anything else in life. No different.

It's every man for himself in this world. Always remember that. If you don't, then everyone will let you down.

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A few weeks after Joey left the Crew, Phil Laak broke up with me as a friend. He called me up from the Card Castle and said he needed to talk to me and it was important. I told him I was at Gianna's, so he headed over. A pizza we had just ordered was still warm when the Unabomber arrived at my girlfriend's house. I offered him a slice of pepperoni. He took one, and made small talk about his latest winning session at the Commerce. Then he asked to talk to me alone and we went into the kitchen.

"I can't be friends with you anymore. It's negative EV."

Of everything Phil said in the next ten minutes, those were the two sentences I remember verbatim. He started the conversation by recounting a story about the dinner he and Antonio had that night with Annie Duke and a few other industry types. My name came up in the dinner conversation, and apparently Annie and someone else at the table were fairly critical of me over Pokerspot.

Phil and Antonio had sat quietly. They didn't mention they knew me, had lived with me, travelled with me. They just kept their mouths shut until the topic shifted.

Then Phil recounted his thought process. Phil insisted he was very broken up about it, but he had made the decision that being associated with me could potentially keep him from reaching his goals in the poker world. He detailed the whole thought process for me, laid out the considerations he had weighed out in his head. He was worried the Pokerspot shadow following my career could touch his. And he did seem genuinely upset about breaking off our friendship. Phil showed more emotion in those ten minutes than I had seen from him in the entire year and a half we had gotten to know each other. He told me he thought I was a great guy, and he thought I was getting a bum rap. He said he wished we could be friends away from the poker world, but he knew that wouldn't work.

Phil kept on rambling and going on about it. I think he must have been waiting for me to let him know it was ok and I understood. But I wouldn't manage more than a "that sucks" during his whole rant. I was practically speechless, muted by a strange mix I'd never felt before and haven't felt since. An emotional cocktail of disappointment, hurt, disgust and amazement.

Gianna was listening right outside the kitchen. She had eavesdropped every word, and finally came in. Gianna had plenty to say. She expressed rather eloquently everything I was feeling. She was crying when she finally told him to leave, which he did, wishing me luck and saying goodbye before he left through the front door and drove off in his car.

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I remember the car Phil Laak was driving that summer in LA. It was a 1960s dark green economy car. I think it was an Oldsmobile but it could have just as easily been a Ford. It was in pristine condition, and Phil claimed to have bought it from an elderly woman after seeing it parked in her driveway. Supposedly he had gotten it for less than \$3k. It was a beautiful ride, a huge step up from the hundred dollar Hyundai he had loaned me in San Jose.

Before the unfriend, Phil had one day let me drive the car alone to grab some In-n-Out hamburgers when he was hanging at the Card Castle. It felt awesome driving that beast around Los Angeles. Phil had installed a CD player in the classic car. He had a booklet of CDs on the passenger floorboard.

I remember driving up to a stop sign with nobody behind me. I rolled both of the front windows down, grabbed the CD book, and pulled out a mystery mixtape that had something like “Phil’s Mix #1” written in a black sharpie on the front.

I cranked up the radio and slid the CD into the player. I had no idea what to expect. What blared from the speakers was just as surprising as it was familiar: “MMMbop” from the brother-boy-band Hanson. A teenie-bopper pop song that had been huge in the late nineties.

I run into Phil all the time. The poker world is small and the tournament circuit even smaller. He’d treat me like a stranger, except for the few times when we’ve been at the same tournament table. Those times have always been awkward, be he’d acknowledge me and ask how I’ve been. I’d do the same. Then it’s business.

I missed Phil and still do. We spent a lot of time together and had some good laughs. But I think back to that CD and realize maybe I really didn’t know him at all.

CHAPTER TEN

The Rolling Stone

“There are three things that change a person. Success, failure, and time. You can’t really know somebody until you’ve seen them through all three.”

Darin Thomas

The rest of 2003 went by in a blur. Not too many life lessons learned. Gianna introduced me to Paris Hilton after a night of drinking at the Standard nightclub. At the time, she wasn’t famous and I had no idea who she was. But she knew Gianna.

Paris invited us up to her hotel room to get a sneak peak of a VHS she was carrying around. It was the pilot episode of *The Simple Life*. She seemed super proud of it, and was certain it was going to make her a star. But it would be a different video that would blow the girl up.

A few weeks after our preview, a poker player named Rick Saloman released the Paris Hilton sex tape. I watched that tacky, blurry scene along with the rest of the world. It catapulted the girl into fame. Now, it’s almost cliché. Every LA rich girl who wants to be famous releases a sex tape, each one having higher production value than the last. Follow it up with a reality show, a fragrance, a single, and a lot of partying at Tao and you end up with another fame formula not much different from the boy-band formula we were trying to solve.

Is there something to take away from it? Maybe this. If your girlfriend asks you if you saw the sex tape of her debutante frienemy floating around the Internet, the same one every single other male in the history of the world had also seen... if you get questioned into that corner it is probably one of those rare occasions where it’s better to lie.



After the Paris admission, things were a bit tense going into Christmas. They got worse on Christmas Day. Gianna had told me what she wanted that year. Several times she made it clear. A ruby ring. Simple.

So the day before Christmas, I made a trip to Walmart with my brother and bought her what she wanted. A perfect ruby ring. It was only \$60, and it was flawless. It was manufactured.

For thousands of years, alchemists had been trying to create rubies out of other metals and stones. It must have been the equivalent of turning lead into gold. In the late 1800s, someone figured it out. It would be a Frenchman named Auguste Verneuil who would eventually share the process with the world, leading to the millions of carats of synthetic rubies being produced for boyfriends in Walmarts everywhere.

I saw that ruby ring as a great achievement of humanity. First we created fire. Then we created rubies. The ring would be a testament to mankind's ingenuity. A reminder of the incredible age we live in and the future technology we would share together.

The next day, when Gianna opened up her gift, she was as pleased as I'd hoped. Until she turned the box around and read a sticker on the bottom that said "manufactured ruby." Her joy and gratitude immediately turned south.

In her mind, the ruby was "fake" and it symbolized our relationship. I've heard it said a girl breaks up with a boy many times in her own head before letting him know. That Christmas of 2003 was another time she broke up with me to herself.



In 2006, when I won my first WSOP bracelet, Gianna had broken up with me in real life nearly a year and a half before. I was still carrying a torch for the girl, and after I won the tournament I took the bracelet into a jeweler I knew

and had him snip off a few links of gold. I had the jeweler take a few of the diamonds off the face of the bracelet. Then I picked out the biggest, fattest natural ruby in his store and had him melt the links of gold into a ring mold to hold the gem and the couple of World Series diamonds.

The resulting treasure put the Walmart ring to shame. I flew out to LA to meet Gianna for coffee, armed with the ring, thinking it was the fix-all that would win her heart back.

It didn't work. But she did take the ring.

I should have listened to Bobby. "The girl is gone, bro. You're just going to mess up your bracelet."

He was right. That bracelet has never fit right since. It's tighter on my wrist than it should be. And there are two holes where there should be spit diamonds in the letters "W" and "P".

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Life Lesson #32

Don't mess up your bracelet trying to impress a girl.

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Brett and I started the 2004 year with a New Year's goal of making it to the top of Cardplayer Magazine's Player of the Year (POY) points race. There has never really been a prize for securing the spot, other than the Cardplayer cover which usually comes along with the award. But besides the WSOP Main Event bracelet, the Cardplayer POY award held more prestige to us than anything else you could win in the poker world.

A good argument can be made that the POY award, and similar ranking systems, are flawed to the point of being meaningless. They generally give credit for every cash while completely ignoring the bustouts. This leads to an award that favors volume of tournaments over actual quality of play. This is

kind of like giving the Silver Slugger Award, Major League Baseball's offensive trophy, to the player with the most at bats.

Every ranking system in poker up to now basically works this same way. Count the cashes, run it through a formula, spit out a list of players. Generally they give multipliers for high buy-ins and high entrant tournaments. They always end up with goofy results.

I don't fault the publications that put out these ranking lists. There is no other way to rank players. Tournament venues generally do not release a list of the players who fail to cash. Until they do, and a ranking system can be developed which resembles more of a batting average mixed with slugging percentage, it's the best we have.

I remember a conversation I'd have with Layne Flack. One year, Layne had quite a number of final tables, but had put in so much volume and had enough bustouts that he was barely above even. Yet, the Cardplayer POY race had him listed as the #2 player in the world. When asked about it in an interview, he gave a classic Layne reply.

"I'm number two? I'd hate to be the guy in third."

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

After the Moneymaker event, a lot of other poker players must have made POY a goal. That's the only explanation I can come up with for so many people showing up in the dead of winter to play cards in Tunica, Mississippi. It's a horrible little town in the best of times, and in the winter it might be the unhappiest place in the world.

Brett and I were both there, and busted out of every tournament we played. This wasn't a huge hit on Brett's bankroll. He had negotiated a full-time staking deal with Sheets, and was hitting the tournament trail hard on a staker's roll. A bad run in Tunica just meant makeup started accumulating. I was playing on my own dime, however, and my bankroll was shrinking fast.

I arrived in Tunica a few days after Brett. We were sharing a room, and when I got there I noticed several packed suitcases along the wall. They didn't belong to Brett. He explained.

“There's this kid named Chino I loaned a couple hundred to. He blew it in the pit, so I'm holding on to his stuff as collateral until he pays me back.”

Chino Rheem. It was the first time I'd meet the player who would eventually become a legend in the poker world with a November 9 appearance, two WPT titles, and more than \$7 million in tournament winnings (and probably \$8 million in outstanding loans). Back then, Chino was just another low stakes grinder. He would travel along every stop of the tournament trail along with his own crew of regular pros from Hollywood, Florida consisting of Frank Sinopoli, Eric “Ewee” Mizrachi, his twin brother Michael “Grinder” Mizrachi, and their older brother Rob Mizrachi.

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Tunica would also be the first time I'd really get to know Scott Fischman. He was staying with his friend Tony Lazar down the hall from the room Brett and I were sharing. Scott and I spent hours together after bustouts talking about tournament strategy.

It was in Tunica, talking to Fischman, that I really felt my own tournament game develop. We came up with an idea for tournament play called “the perfect path.” The idea was simple, and just a tad optimistic. It was this.

Every tournament you entered could be won. There was a way to go from the first hand to the last without ever putting yourself at risk of busting out.

Of course in practice, the perfect path is and was impossible to walk. Nobody wins every tournament. The best tournament players in the world generally carry an in-the-money percentage of around 20%, and perhaps win 2% of the events they play. Nevertheless, the idea that every tournament is winnable is a powerful one which fundamentally changed the way Scott and I thought about and approached poker tournaments.

Under a perfect path mentality, we stopped looking at certain tournament scenarios as inevitable. If we got our aces cracked after pushing all-in preflop in the early rounds of a tournament, we stopped saying things like “nothing I could do” and instead started wondering about other ways we might have played the hand.

We stopped trying to just get our money in good and instead started to look for the pots we could take without a race. We imagined it was possible to win No-Limit Hold'em tournaments without ever looking at our holecards. Scott and I even tried it a few times, loading up PokerStars and putting a post-it note over the screen. After getting knocked out a few times in a row, we took the post-it note off and stopped folding Aces and Kings.

A few years later, Annette “annette15” Obrestad, the Norwegian poker prodigy who won the WSOPE at only 18 years old, would actually release a hand history of her pulling off a no-look tournament win. It's one of the coolest things I've ever seen a poker player do. Scotty told me she had been helping him teach some courses at the WSOP Academy, where he talked about our perfect path theory and no-look attempts during a presentation. I like to think this was where Annette might have gotten the idea to even try it.

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By the end of the Tunica series, both Scott Fischman and Tony Lazar would officially join The Crew as members. Now at this point, we weren't really playing on a shared bankroll anymore. And neither new member would be joining us in our LA Card Castle. Tony lived in Minnesota with a wife and children, while Scotty was perfectly content in Las Vegas.

So it might be natural to ask, just as both Scotty and Tony asked, what exactly does it mean then to be part of The Crew. To be honest, I have to admit the answer was “not much.” But it did mean *something*.

One thing it meant is we would always have a rail. Anytime a crew member made it to a final table, the rest of us would gather around and give them a perceived home field advantage. It meant we could talk to each other openly

about poker ideas without feeling the need to guard our thoughts and theories about the game. And finally, it meant we'd be doing our best to help each other along in our careers as poker players.

This last aspect is what motivated Brett to talk to Sheets about including Scotty and me in a staking deal for the WSOP. When the 35th Annual World Series of Poker started in April, all three of us would be playing full schedules.



We rolled into Vegas for the 2004 WSOP feeling like champions, optimistic we'd be putting up some huge scores. Binion's Horseshoe was packed with hopeful players who had decided to take a shot after seeing the WSOP on ESPN. It was uncomfortably crowded. The tournament would soon be sold to Harrah's and find its current home at the Rio. This would be the last year the WSOP would be downtown.

I saw Joey at the Horseshoe. He wasn't dealing cards anymore. He had grinded up another bankroll and planned on playing a few of the events. Joey started the Series extremely well, scoring a third place finish in the very first Pot-Limit Hold'em event.

Joey took down a \$40,000 score for that close miss. Forty dimes. It was a huge amount, easily more than he'd expect to earn in a year's worth of dealing. I'd watch him lose it all a week later in a high-stakes cash game across the street at the Golden Nugget. He was playing \$400/800 Limit against Aaron Katz, one of the biggest assholes on the West Coast... and also one of the strongest short-handed players around.

Joey would be broke again before the Main Event. This is the way that bankrolls go for some players. They'll get a big tournament score which will blowup their ego. Then they'll immediately jump into the biggest cash games they can find, and keep going up in limits until they are broke.

Billion or bust. Rinse and repeat. There is no end to this cycle.

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Watching Joey burn through his \$40,000 score was sad. Worse, though, was two years later watching him blow through a \$4 million WPT Championship win. That was altogether tragic. To be fair, Joe's share was only \$1.9 million after splitting it up with his staker. The bulk of it would be gone in under a year. It was like Joey was going for a speed record.

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Scott Fischman started the Series off solid with a 14th place finish in the very same Pot-Limit Hold'em event Bartholdi took 3rd in. Five grand for a fifteen hundred dollar event wasn't a huge score. But it boosted Scott's confidence. Sometimes in poker, that's all it takes.

He won the next event he entered. It was a \$1,500 No-Limit event with a huge field of 831 players. The Crew was in the stands watching the whole final table. It finally came down to our own Scott Fischman and Joe Awada, former professional juggler and current father of six.

Scotty took down \$300k for that win. The Crew had its first bracelet.

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Sheets gave Scotty an extra two grand and told him to take us all out to celebrate. He took us to Spearmint Rhino and bought a never ending string of lap dances. Scotty sat in the corner of our booth admiring his new piece of hardware, while I and the rest of The Crew admired the scenery.

The strippers weren't girls to us that night. They were symbols. The constant stream of g-strings and breasts meant we were living a baller lifestyle. It was an obscene waste of money, but it meant to us that in the game of life, we were winning.

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We all drank a lot the night Scotty won his first bracelet. So we skipped the next day's WSOP tournament. One day of rest and then we were back to the felt for Monday's H.O.R.S.E. tournament. Looking for a repeat.

And we'd get it. Scotty won that event, too.

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The television production team from the year before was back again, this time with the idea they'd expand the ESPN broadcast by focusing on some of the preliminary events. This was probably a bad idea. Poker is barely watchable when it's the No-Limit Hold'em Championship event. But Razz and Deuce-to-Seven Triple Draw Lowball on ESPN? The ratings must have been lower than a Caribbean limbo contest.

They were there filming when Scotty won his first bracelet, which was in one of the prelim events scheduled to broadcast. They were also filming when he won the HORSE event, even though it wouldn't be one of the broadcasted episodes. They collected some footage just the same.

The night of his second win, Sheets gave Scotty another two grand to celebrate with. He repeated the strip club outing. This time, we invited a couple of the ESPN producers to join us. They turned down the lap dances, but accepted a few drinks and asked us questions about The Crew.

Two bracelets in a week. Something special was happening.

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Being in The Crew was like playing a game of H.O.R.S.E... but the basketball version, not the poker version. By winning two bracelets in a week, Scotty had made an incredible shot. Half court. Blindfolded. Then he passed the ball and it was up to each of us to match the shot.

Brett did his part. A few tournaments after Scotty's second win, Jungblut took down his own bracelet. It was in the \$5k Omaha Hi-Low championship against one of the toughest final tables I've ever seen.

Let's count the hardware. Miami John Cernuto (3), Brent Carter (2), Huck Seed (4), Mike Wattel (1), Erick Lindgren (2), Thor Hansen (2), and Minh Nguyen (2). Sixteen bracelets between those last seven seats. Granted many of those have come since Brett's win. Still, even back then, it was an intimidating final table.

But not to Brett. Somehow, he figured he was the favorite. Brett was completely comfortable. It was like he had already won, like he was on a train and knew where it was going to stop. This was the same attitude I had carried with me towards the end of my Main Event run the year before.

Every two hours, the tournament director called for a 15 minute break and Brett rushed out into the Binion's parking lot to "get his head right". He took down the Omaha Hi-Low championship, along with \$187,000, against that world-class field...

Completely stoned out of his mind.

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I remember one time telling Brett about the scene with Phil Laak, where Phil was so carefully collecting every little crumb of weed to put back in his Ziploc baggie. I told Brett the classic line I've already written about how weed was the same price as gold and every crumble was like a little speck of gold dust. I remember Brett laughing.

"Yeah, but you can't get high by smoking gold," he said. "If you could, this bracelet would be a helluva lot thinner!"

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So then it was up to me. Brett had made his own impossible shot on The Crew court. He had created another Spearmint Rhino night. Then he had passed me the ball and it was my turn to make some magic. After several top-18 finishes that series, I'd get as close to gold as you can get in the \$1,500 Razz event.

It was the first time I'd played Razz. But the game is basically just a dumbed down version of Stud Hi-Low, which I was very familiar with from my time propping at Garden City and the hours I'd put into the game online. Moreover, it's tournament poker... and a Razz tournament has more in common with a No-Limit Hold'em tournament than it does with a Razz cash game.

So I wasn't as much of an underdog in that event as it might have looked like. When it got down to the final table, I found myself playing against some pretty heavy hitters. T.J. Cloutier, Howard Lederer, Hoyt Corkins, and John Juanda rounded out the final stretch.

It finally got down to the boss fight. Me vs. T.J. Here was a guy who had already earned four bracelets, and had two runner-up finishes in the Main Event itself. By all rights, T.J. should have won both of those events... each time he got it in as a 3:1 favorite for the lion's share of chips headsup against the eventual winner, only to watch the win escape to a bad beat.

I was outmatched, but the rest of my rail didn't see it that way. Brett, Scotty, Dorf, Bobby, Tony, Joey... they were all there on the rail rooting me on. They were all so confident after the previous scores that the idea I might lose seemed to not even be a possibility. Gianna was also there. She had driven the 5 hours from Culver City and was rooting for me harder than anybody.

Right before I came in second, Dorf motioned me over between hands. "Don't forget to hug your girlfriend first when you win this thing, Dutch." This is very good advice.

As I mentioned earlier, for some crazy reason the ESPN producers decided to air the Razz event, devoting a whole episode to the final table of that horribly boring game. So it was in front of a fairly big audience that I got as close to a bracelet as one can get. It was crushing, maybe even more so to my fellow crew members watching who perhaps still believed we were fated for this.

And like almost everything you see on television, the match was edited down to a glimmer of itself. An observer saw it finished in just three hands, even though it took over an hour for T.J. to finish me off. I hate to admit it, but he deserved that bracelet. There is no question he was a better player than I was. If it was No-Limit Hold'em, I might have had a chance... I could have gotten it in bad like Chris Ferguson or Bill Smith had before, at least saving a 25% chance of bad-beating Cloutier.

In a limit game like Razz, though, where the chips move so slowly it's painful and where more than half the hand is played face-up, I didn't have a glimmer of hope against T.J.

There is an anti-excitement when the final card is dealt in a Limit match. By the time the last chip is collected, the outcome is almost certain. There was just a hush and a growing disappointment among my rail as the tournament came to an end. And there was the glow of the lights and the ESPN camera.

I walked to the other side of the table, defeated, to shake T.J.'s hand. I congratulated him. Then I asked if I could hold his bracelet. Of course I could.

The disappointment of coming in second was making me physically sick to my stomach. I held the gold in my fingertips just as I had held Brett's bracelet and both of Scotty's, yet this one seemed heavier. This one could have been mine. I wanted the win so much, and now the opportunity was gone. It might have been the last time I was headsup for a WSOP bracelet, and that realization was horrible.

"Don't worry," T.J. said to me. "You'll win plenty of those."

I wasn't so sure.



And so the rest of the WSOP concluded with not much more drama, but not before the ESPN producers approached Scotty and asked if they could put together some footage on *The Crew* at his house in Vegas. We all showed up. Even Joey, who secretly loved the attention even while acting like it was lame.

ESPN gave us a two-part “Nuts” segment during the Main Event. It would make us poker famous.



Somewhere watching that year’s WSOP coverage was an author and freelance writer named Ivan Solotaroff. When he watched *The Crew*, a group of twenty-something year old boys competing at poker’s highest levels for millions of dollars, he saw a story. He called us up on the phone a few months later asking if we’d be willing to do an interview for *Rolling Stone*.

He hadn’t sold the story to them yet, but he assured us he could. We took him at his word and each interviewed with him. Sure enough, he made it happen.

The next summer each of us would be back at the World Series. Scotty and Joey and I said maybe thirty words to each other over the course of the whole year. Brett and I weren’t even on speaking terms. *The Crew* bankroll was gone, and the group as an entity was all but a memory. Yet the same month that the 2005 WSOP started, *Rolling Stone* came out with an article entirely about *The Crew*. Right there on the June cover, alongside the Dave Matthews Band, was an article titled “Poker’s Crazy Geniuses”. They were talking about us. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, *The Crew* was bigger than ever.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Canadian Silver and the Media Girls

“I’m sick of following my dreams. I’m just going to ask where they are going, and catch up with them later.”

Mitch Hedberg

The first time I met Layne Flack was at the Hustler Grand Slam in 2002. Just a few months before, Layne had won his second and third bracelets in back-to-back events, catapulting him into the ranks of poker royalty. Most fanboys assume that’s how he earned his nickname: “Back to Back Flack”. In actuality, he had been carrying the moniker for three years, having taken consecutive titles at the 1999 Legends of Poker.

Layne was playing a \$25 single-table satellite with Dorf, both drinking in stereo trying to get their fade on. I heard them laughing from across the room, and when I took a break from my \$2/5 NL to say hello to Dorf, he introduced me to Layne.

I tried not to look starstruck. I made small talk with Dorf and then went back to my seat. I picked up my stack when the big blind hit and headed back over to the table to watch one of my poker heroes play. The satellite wound down, and eventually Layne won. It was a massacre. He might as well have been Kobe Bryant playing a pick-up basketball game with a team of kindergartners.

Layne had immediately forgotten me. It was obvious by the way he looked at me when I congratulated him on his \$200 win that he didn’t remember my introduction less than an hour before. I decided to try to make a lasting impression.

So I introduced myself to him again. I told him I had been on a real tear in San Jose, placing second in the San Pablo tournament and taking down several of the weekly tournaments at Garden City and Bay 101.

Then I told him I had been scouting a super juicy \$2/4 Limit Hold'em game. I pointed to a random table. If Layne would stake me in that game for just \$20, I told him, I was sure I'd be able to double and maybe even triple his money.

“How much for you to just go away?”

It was a great way to handle a railbird.

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Dorf introduced us again during my 2004 Razz final table. First time for Layne. Third time for me. Layne knew who I was, but not from the Hustler Club. He had watched the 2003 broadcast, hoping to catch glimpses of himself on ESPN after another double bracelet year. He had five of them now, yet I won more airtime than he did simply because I held onto the chip lead in the Main Event for a few hours. Everybody loves a sunrise.

Layne was veteran enough to disappear before I lost to Cloutier. He'd reappear later that night for the celebration at Spearmint Rhino.

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I wasn't watching when Raymer took down the 2004 title. The worst day of the year for a poker player is the day when their Main Event dream comes to an end. I had made it deep into Day 2, only to get knocked out by Howard Lederer. After knocking me out of the championship event, he looked at a poker reporter and said, “chalk that one up to me.” The poker forums loved it, their idol Howard Lederer, the consummate pro, knocking out the villain behind Pokerspot.

Greg Raymer had been one of my biggest detractors on the forums. He didn't have skin in the game, had never played on Pokerspot, yet every time my name was mentioned in a thread he made sure to add his opinion about what a

scumbag I was. It's hard not to take it personally, even though I doubt it was. After all, Raymer added his two cents into every thread. He was a full-time patent attorney with a family, yet somehow he found the time to be one of the biggest trolls on RGP and 2+2. An anonymous mudslinger, building a reputation one post at a time.

Raymer sold shares in the Main Event that year to stakers he met on those forums, so his rail went as deep as the millions he'd give away for the win. In another universe, on another branch, I might have been sweating along with them. We had a lot in common, both of us Missouri boys with a JD and a love of poker. But Raymer had drawn a line in the sand, so I would have been rooting for David Williams to take the whole thing down if I had been watching.

But I wasn't watching. Instead, I was holed up in a Binion's hotel room snorting cocaine for the first time with Layne Flack.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Had I been a friend instead of a fanboy, I might have refused when Layne offered the powder. I might have encouraged him to give it up. Instead, I reasoned to myself that there was a time and a place for everything and the time to snort cocaine was with Layne "Back to Back" Flack.

A few months later, Layne would hit a low. He burned through four bracelets worth of winnings in two years with nothing to show for it. He'd be weeks from eviction from a single bedroom apartment when his girlfriend Paulette reached out to some other poker players and asked for help. Daniel Negreanu put up \$60,000 to send Layne to a rehab center. *That* is how a friend acts.

My own downward spiral started slow. I didn't feel much from the first cocaine hit, so I did another line. I kept up with Layne for a day and a half before heading back to Los Angeles. I didn't feel like the drug did anything to me except erase two days. I felt like it was back to normal.

To everybody else, my girlfriend and The Crew, I was slipping off the deep end. I started sleeping less, wouldn't stop talking about random nonsense, and slowly sunk deeper into full-blown mania. I went through a buying splurge where I wasted thousands of dollars on worthless domain names. I blew my online roll trying to use bet-sizing as a means to communicate with the universe.

I became more agitated by the hour, convinced I was being watched. Most of this episode happened at Gianna's house, with Dorf and Bobby taking turns making sure I didn't do something too crazy.

Gianna's mood switched first to anger, then to worry, then to fear. I was getting worse, and even took a few swings at Bobby when he tried to physically keep me from venturing out into the Los Angeles night at 3am. Eventually, they all had enough. Gianna called the police and explained I was going through a bipolar episode. They cuffed me and called an ambulance to drive me to an LA County mental hospital.

So at the same time Layne checked into rehab, I checked into a psych ward.

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Life Lesson #33
A good friend is a good influence.

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Gianna had a sponsor in AA with bipolar disorder. During one heavy manic episode, her sponsor took a flight to the Middle East. She ended up being deported back to America, but not before being gang-raped in a Turkish prison. That's what happens when a manic has a passport.

The LA mental hospital wasn't so bad. Better than Antigua, worse than Columbia. Gianna should have broken up with me. Instead, she relapsed back into drugs. After three weeks, I was released from the hospital to find my girlfriend was back on smack.

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For some reason, Brett took it personally when I got committed. He thought I was faking it, and had no time for the show. He couldn't wrap his head around the idea that I didn't have a plan, that sometimes crazy is just crazy. Our relationship was strained further when, after being committed, a company called Action Poker came out with a site called ZeroRake.com.

I had promoted the rake-free concept so well that when ZeroRake.com launched, rumors flew that I was the man behind the site. In reality, it was a guy named Jake Kalpakian who was responsible for the Internet's first rake-free cardroom. I had met Jake a few years prior at one of the gaming conferences. He invited me to his offices in Vancouver at the end of 2000 when things were still going well for Pokerspot, and I jumped at the chance to visit Canada on someone else's dime. The reason Jake was willing to pay for my ticket and hotel was because he needed poker software.

I remember meeting Jake in his Vancouver office. Outside in the lobby, he had a large silver nugget on display underneath a glass case. His company, LasVegasFromHome.com (LVFH), was the rebirth of a dead mineral rights company called Bronx Minerals. Jake had a string of similar mineral rights companies under his belt. Between a Vancouver Sun article and some first-hand accounts from angry investors, I gathered Jake and his uncle Bedo had been replaying the same stock hustle for over a decade.

The Canadian Mineral Rights Scam

Step 1. Form a corporation with a name like Golden Nugget Exploration or Trans Atlantic Enterprises.

Step 2. Purchase the mineral rights for a piece of land. It doesn't matter where.

Step 3. Pay a few geologists to dig up ground samples and run some mineral analyses. After a few dozen, find an outlier. One of the mineral reports will inevitably show your selected land is rich in a certain type of rare mineral. It doesn't matter which one.

Step 4. Pay a few stock promoters and brokerage companies to generate buzz around your upcoming IPO on the CDNX. Encourage their efforts by throwing lavish parties with blackjack and hookers.

Step 5. Sell shares in your new IPO to blue collar hopefuls. Build a mine on the land. Dump your shares before the mine turns out not to contain an abundance of the mineral indicated by the outlier report.

Step 6. Profit.

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Jake pumped the share price of LVFH the same way he had learned to do with his string of failed mining companies. In June of 2000, with a coming soon page on the company's ActionPoker.com site, Jake and his company hosted a Howe Street launch party featuring the Playmate of the Year and four more of her Playboy Bunny friends. It was just like any number of mineral stock pump-n-dumps. Except this time, Kalpakian realized there actually *was* gold in the ore sample.

A few months later, the stock price dipped after software woes kept their flagship site from launching. Their team had spent more than a year on vaporware. When he flew me to Vancouver towards the end of 2000, I could tell he was desperate for a working software platform.

But I had already decided against handing over the code. My read was that I was walking into a scam, and when the licensing proposal Kalpakian handed me only included a small percentage of revenue which may or may not have come, I made it clear we weren't interested.

I remember Jake saying to me, "hype is always bigger than reality." He also said that eventually they'd get their software working, and if the players didn't come when they launched, he was going to lower their rake to \$1 per hand. He stated it like a threat. "What will Paradise and the rest of you do then?"

“I guess we’ll see.” I shook his hand and wished him luck. Then I enjoyed the rest of my weekend in Vancouver. I didn’t think about Kalpakian again until an angry public exchange with Brett more than three years later.

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After my LA mental hospital stay, I went back to the Card Castle to find that Gank had left. I didn’t know why at the time, but I’d later find out Brett left because he thought I sold him out. While I was committed, Jake Kalpakian made good on his threat to take the rake race all the way to the bottom. He launched ZeroRake.com.

Despite official denials by ZeroRake, members on the poker forums were certain I was behind the site. When Brett was told by a mutual friend that I owned a third of the company, he felt betrayed. In his mind, we were a team working on the rake-free movement together. He went straight to the forums to reveal what he thought he knew.

I don’t know why Brett didn’t believe me when I told him I had nothing to do with ZeroRake. He didn’t believe Bobby, who told him the same thing. He didn’t even believe Gianna, who confirmed I was surprised as anyone when I saw someone had actually launched a rake-free cardroom.

By the end of the year, Jake decided to shut the experiment down. He had built it, but nobody showed up. Nobody cared. It was a ghost town and wasn’t even making the nominal amount he needed to keep the servers running.

ZeroRake didn’t last long. Brett’s grudge lasted quite a while.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

**“I don’t know why I didn’t see that Dutch is basically a con artist.
Maybe I was smoking too much weed.”**

- Brett Jungblut

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

There is a book called *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* written by Robert Cialdini. Inside, Cialdini discusses his six principles of influence. These are the weapons that lead to action, and second on his list is “consistency”. It might have been easier for Brett and me to mend fences had it not been for this principle of influence. After Brett’s posts on 2+2 and his quote to Rolling Stone (which is the one I printed here), it would look inconsistent for him to move away from his words.

Ivan Solotaroff, the author of the Rolling Stone article, had talked with all of The Crew members at length before writing his article. I talked to Ivan for almost two hours at the Bellagio cafe at the beginning of December 2005. I had driven to Vegas with the pretense of playing the Five Diamonds event, but the real reason I wanted to be there was to get on the record with the Rolling Stone writer.

I remember how easy it was to open up to Ivan. It’s the only in-person interview I’ve ever done where the interviewer didn’t record the conversation. Instead, Ivan pulled out a small ringed notepad and would scribble words as we talked. It seemed archaic, and when I asked him why he wasn’t taping, Ivan explained that putting a microphone or cassette recorder in front of an interview subject made them guarded.

“You can still quote people without the quote being on tape,” Ivan told me. “And if you’re worried about getting a quote wrong, then you can always just ask your subject to confirm it later on before you go to print.”

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I’m sure Ivan and Brett talked for quite awhile, and Brett no doubt opened up his life to Ivan just as I had. But for all Brett might have said, the one quote which actually made it into the Rolling Stone article was the one proclaiming to the world that I was a con artist. Brett had shouted to everyone that I had conned him into being part of The Crew. An assertion like that is hard to back away from.

Brett and I would eventually put the past behind us. It took a couple of years, but he finally came around to realizing he was wrong about ZeroRake. Even apologized, which I thought was big of him. Our friendship has never been quite as hopeful as it was... it's older and perhaps stronger, but scarred.

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Gianna stopped shooting heroin, and the two of us decided we needed a change. We moved to her hometown outside of Fresno with a new life plan. We would try to build a web design firm. Bobby decided to come along for the ride.

With Brett already gone, and Dorf moving in with one of his local LA friends, it was time to say goodbye to our Culver City home. I collected my deposit from Tom and shutdown the Card Castle.

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Our new plan in Fresno centered around an empty bank building Gianna's family had recently purchased. From the outside, it wasn't much to look at. But on the inside, it was a beautiful space with 20' ceilings and 5,000 square feet of open working room. Gianna painted the walls dark red and grey. We centered the brand of our development firm around the giant bank vault in the middle of the floor-plan. We called our company "Intervault" with the idea to use the building's bank vault as a marketing ploy. Bobby suggested we get into the hosting game, putting servers into the vault and building a reputation on the illusion of security. It was a good plan.

It might have worked if Gianna and I had been able to make love stay. We were miserable in Fresno. Our business venture put even more stress on an already fragile situation. I thought bringing her back to her roots would make our relationship stronger, but it had the opposite effect. Gianna had left home for a reason.

Our breakup was mostly my fault, if it was anybody's. I stopped taking the new bipolar cocktail the doctors in LA had prescribed. Before long, I was back in the rapid cycle.



When you have a history of bipolar disorder, it's hard to convince a mental health professional that the reason you were walking down a California highway with your hitchhiker thumb pointed up was because you had to make it to your Rolling Stone photo shoot in Las Vegas. It sounds like a delusion of grandeur, a classic symptom of mania.

We were supposed to be in Vegas on Friday to meet the magazine's photographer. Gianna and I had planned on driving down together. Bobby was already there, along with the rest of The Crew. Except Brett, who refused to show up.

Instead of making the eight hour drive to Vegas, Gianna broke up with me. She ended the relationship with a fight and me storming out of the house, determined to make the shoot with or without her. I started walking towards Vegas. She called the police and told them I was going through a manic episode and was a danger to myself and others. An hour later, after being picked up and handcuffed by a pair of cops, I was in front of a psychologist trying to explain why they couldn't keep me for the weekend.

This was the one time I've been committed that I really don't think I needed to be. Maybe Gianna really thought I was in trouble, but somewhere deep down I think she was glad to see me miss the photo shoot which I had valued higher than our broken relationship.

The Fresno doctors put me on a 72 hour hold, which lasted longer because they don't count weekends when calculating time served. Then they let me go. By the time I walked outside again, the Rolling Stone photo shoot was over.

Bobby picked me up from the Fresno mental hospital. He was back with the story. The photographer took most of the photos in one of Scott's bedrooms that Fischman had converted into a poker room. We'd have to wait until the summer to see which one the magazine picked.

The two of us headed over to the house we had shared with my ex-girlfriend to pack our things. We abandoned everything we couldn't fit into my little brother's car. Nearly broke again with no plan and nowhere to go.

We fueled up our car and headed to Vegas.

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Thanks to a 1st place finish in one of the Stars online tournaments, it didn't take long for Bobby and me to move from a weekly on the Strip and into a proper house. The WSOP came and went, with both of us playing a light schedule. I finished the Series strong, finishing in the top 200 in the 2005 Main Event. It put me even for the summer, but it was a disappointment. I had played a meaty schedule, and was still sulking in a post-breakup depression. Another year, another chance at greatness slipping through my fingers.

In Vegas, I wasn't hanging out much with Fischman. He rarely left his house, spending nearly every hour of every day multi-tabling online. Bobby and I tried to constantly coax him out, but there was an ATM in his living room and he played like it wouldn't last.

Joey, on the other hand, could always be coaxed out. We were chilling a lot at the house he shared with a few other poker buddies (including Brandon Meyers, who at the time was a micro-stakes grinder but is now a high-stakes pro and Joey's brother-in-law).

The rest of my year disappeared into a pot-induced smoke bloom. Every month's poker results were dismal, and just good enough to make rent and the rest of our bills. I was stagnating.

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Life Lesson #34
Poker isn't therapy.

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I blame much of my lackluster results in 2005 on my mindset. I was still heartsick over the breakup with Gianna. A few months after getting back to Vegas, I called my ex-girlfriend. She had moved back to LA and was in a much better mood than she was when I had left her in Fresno. I hoped we might rekindle our relationship, and it seemed likely we would when I invited Gianna to come stay with me in Vegas for a weekend and she said yes. I was thrilled at the prospect of seeing her again.

It wouldn't happen, though. The day before she was planning on arriving in Vegas, she called me up and said she was back together with Steve, the musician she left for me almost two years before. He had taken her out to coffee the same day I had invited her to Vegas. He had just released a new album and was doing really well.

Somehow, this news felt worse than our breakup. I was sick about losing Gianna, but had always thought we'd eventually be getting back together. Like a movie, we'd meet at the Bellagio fountains and I'd say the perfect line. We'd kiss and makeup. Credits would roll. But with this new revelation, the chances of a perfect movie ending to our relationship were getting pretty slim. Like... really fucking unlikely.

Poker was a way of taking my mind off the girl. So was weed. I've never heard a poker success story that started, "I was trying to escape from my problems by putting in a lot of hands." Whatever you are going through mentally will follow you to the felt. At best, you have results that looked like mine in 2005. Flat and barely above water. At worst, you donk off your entire roll.

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The best way to get your mind off of a girl is to find another girl. I didn't have to look long. In fact, I didn't have to look at all. By this time, poker had blown up and I was poker famous. Along with autograph requests at the Rio, I had started getting a number of emails rolling into my inbox. Mostly from fanboys, asking for advice about their game or my analysis of a hand they played. Once in a blue moon, I'd get an email from a girl. Sometimes there would be photos.

One such email came from a girl named Amanda. She sent a picture, and appeared to be a petite pretty blonde. I emailed her back with an AOL Instant Messenger address, and a few minutes later she jumped on AIM and we began to chat. She said she had moved to Vegas from North Carolina with her boyfriend, an online poker player named Mr3000 (or something like that). She said his PokerStars username as if she expected me to know who he was. I didn't... and still don't.

I remember the photo she sent. Amanda was sitting on a couch, all smiles, next to her boyfriend who had an open laptop in front of him. He couldn't even be bothered to look up to the camera at whoever was taking their picture. Life was passing him by, and he was multi-tabling. He was losing his girlfriend, and didn't even realize it because he was too focused on his current poker hand.

I didn't waste much time... after about a half hour of online chatting, I asked Amanda if she wanted to come over. I typed out a fantasy I came up with on the spot... of her driving to my house, slipping through the front door, and the two of us having sex without even saying a word to each other. It worked. An hour later, I was staring at my ceiling with a new girl at my side, flushed and out of breath. I broke the silence.

“Wow.”

I didn't even know her last name.



Leatherman. That was the girl's last name. Amanda Leatherman. I'd grow to like her quite a bit... even love her, maybe. Now, she's a veteran of the poker media, having reported for PokerWire and WPT, as well as hosting the PokerStars.net's *Big Game* television program. But back then, she was completely unknown.

She came over quite a bit that fall and winter. Each time, I couldn't help but share a small amount of her guilt at being “the other man”. Her boyfriend was completely oblivious to her cheating. Every time she came over, we'd have the

same conversation. I'd encourage Amanda to breakup with Mr3000. She'd tell me it wasn't that simple and I'd insist it was. All she had to do was tell him it was over. She wouldn't even have to confront him. Just pack her shit, send a text, and I'd be over to help move her things. She could start living in my house right away.

It didn't happen that way. Amanda eventually broke up with her boyfriend after the new year. She waited until after she landed her job reporting for PokerWire. When she broke up with Mr3000, she moved in with another PokerWire reporter named Heather.

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Life Lesson #35
Never sleep with media.

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The first few months Amanda was a poker media personality, life on the trail was great. I got more coverage than anyone, appearing in every single PokerWire chip update. I'd see her on circuit stops and we'd share knowing glances across the tournament floor. Sometimes, we'd share hotel rooms. She'd do interviews with me during the breaks. When we were alone, she'd ask my advice on how she could improve. One night, we were lying in bed next to each other, watching her videos on YouTube. I remember giving her this advice, which she took.

“You should stop referring to yourself as ‘PokerWire Amanda.’ You need to end each segment by saying ‘I’m Amanda Leatherman for PokerWire.com’ because you don’t want to attach yourself so much to the site. These things come and go, and you’ll still be here long after PokerWire is gone.”

Amanda was quiet for a second. Then responded, “Joe said the same thing.”

She was talking about Sebok, the founder/co-host of *Poker Road* and stepson of poker icon Barry Greenstein. Joe hosted his radio show with tournament favorite Gavin Smith. The two made up the best on-radio duo the poker

media has seen, then or since. Sebok's show was one of the main draws at the PokerWire website, and he was part of the company family. He and Amanda had been hanging out a lot, and had become very good friends.

A few months into 2006, Amanda and Joe officially started dating. I couldn't blame her, really. Sebok was good-looking, funny, smart and charming. He had been running hot on the tournament trail, taking down two major tournaments and \$600k before the summer. And at the time, Sebok was one of the more powerful people in poker.

Supposedly, Joe Sebok had lived next to one of the Twitter co-founders. When Twitter started recommending people to follow for their new signups, they put Sebok on a shortlist of suggestions. As a result, he was the first person in poker to surpass one million follows. To this day, Joe still has more Twitter followers than Hellmuth, Brunson, and Chan combined.

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I have to admit it. I was jealous when I saw Amanda and Sebok were officially a couple. Surely Joe knew we had been hooking up on the regular for awhile. How hypocritical was it for me, being on the cheating side of Amanda's former relationship for the months leading up to her breakup, to now feel like I had some strange dibs on her? Yet, that's exactly how I felt. It seemed disrespectful, somehow against "bro code", that Sebok was stealing the girl.

I was more upset with Leatherman, though. I couldn't quite put my finger on why, but it felt like she had somehow used me to get a foothold into the poker world. I felt played. I told her as much the last few times we hooked up after her and Sebok became official. In the nicest way possible, she made it clear she was moving up the relationship pyramid.

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A couple of years ago, I remember walking out of the Rio with my current girlfriend Michele. It was the end of May, a couple days before the WSOP kicked off. We were visiting the Rio to make use of the gym. As we were walking

back to our car, we saw Jimmy “Gobboboy” Fricke walking slowly on the newly placed red carpet leading up to the Rio’s convention center entrance.

Gobboboy had his hands full, holding a big cardboard box carefully in front of him. I knew what it was from 100 feet away, having grown up with a professional cake decorator as a mother. When we got closer, Michele was happily surprised to see that Jimmy was holding a baked goods box, with a plastic window on the top. Inside were two dozen cupcakes.

I smiled at Jimmy. “Whatsup Gobbo? Good to see you this year!”

He was friendly. “Oh, hey Dutch. What are you up to?”

Michele couldn’t help herself. “Oh my god, those look soooo good! Can I have one?”

“Sorry. These are for the media. Good luck this year, Dutch.”

Michele couldn’t hide her disappointed look as she watched Jimmy disappear into the Rio. She wasn’t a girl used to being refused.

For the rest of the summer, the Poker News updates always listed Jimmy in the chip counts. It seemed every few updates would contain a hand report with a headline like “Fricke’s on a roll” or “Gobboboy takes another one!”

There’s an important lesson to be learned here about the metagame of poker. If you want media coverage, give the reporters cupcakes. Don’t sleep with them. Nothing bad can happen if you give a reporter a cupcake. Things will not get awkward. They won’t stop including you in tournament reports and chip counts, somehow missing you even when you have the chip lead.

For better media coverage, and an increased shot at poker sponsorship deals and magazine covers, always live by the following simple rule. Cupcakes are good, sex not so much.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Tunica Quiet Game

“There’s a difference between a failure and a fiasco. A failure is simply the non-presence of success. Any fool can accomplish failure. But a fiasco... A fiasco is a disaster of mythic proportions. A fiasco is a folktale told to others that makes other people feel more alive because it didn’t happen to them.”

- *Elizabethtown* (2005)

At the beginning of 2006, I convinced Joey Bartholdi to make a run for Cardplayer’s POY race with me. We’d start in Tunica and try to hit it out of the park. The only thing stopping us was that Joey was nearly broke and couldn’t afford to make the trip to Mississippi. I had run up a mid four-figure bankroll on PartyPoker and offered to loan him \$5k for travel expenses and to tide him over until he was back on his feet. He made a few calls and got a staking deal with a buddy and fellow pro, Joe Cassidy. We booked a flight and a room at the Gold Strike.

Tunica is such a weird gambling destination. The Gold Strike Casino is technically a riverboat which sits on the Mississippi river, right next to the Grand Casino, another riverboat. In Mississippi, like most states, it is illegal to gamble. Poker is a crime. Unless you’re floating on a river. How this makes any sense is a mystery to everyone.

Back then, the two casinos each ran their own tournament series. The Gold Strike had a WPT and the Grand had a WSOP Circuit. For three weeks at the beginning of the year, this dreary and cold nothing of a city became a poker mecca. Thousands of players descended, trying to capture their share of the poker boom.

Four days after we rolled into Tunica, Joey took down a runner-up finish in Event #2 for close to \$60k. Just like that, he was back on top. Zero to hero. But of course, he had to give half of it to Cassidy. The other half, he'd blow on the rest of the series tournaments. Bartholdi would be back down to a few grand before the end of the trip.

For my part, I made three final tables in Tunica. But with those taking the form of 7th, 8th and 9th, I was losing when the final events took place. So it goes with poker. It can feel like you're making progress while the bankroll slips away.

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A few days before the WPT championship, Joey and I were sitting at the Gold Strike bar when a young poker player named Rod came up to introduce himself. An LSAT tutor turned poker player, Rod had built up a decent roll online and was in Tunica to take his shot with the live pros. He recognized Joey and me from the ESPN Nuts segment the year before.

It was odd talking to Rod. He seemed so confident in himself, yet underlying his confidence was a desperate need for us to accept him as a player. There was also an aggressiveness I couldn't quite place during our first few encounters. He asked our opinion about a hand and then argued with us about the line we suggested.

God, he was annoying. The kid loved to hear himself talk. After about twenty minutes of listening to "The Rod Show," Joey and I had enough. We excused ourselves and headed back to our room.

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It was always super easy to find weed on the tournament trail, and we still had almost half left from the ounce we scored an hour after landing at the Memphis airport. We called up Eric "Ewee" Mizrachi and Chino Rheem with an offer to smoke them out. Three minutes later, the Florida grinders were in our hotel room, laughing it up and sharing stories between tokes. Halfway through the

first joint, Ewee suggested we pull out a deck and each put up twenty bucks. I ran downstairs and returned with four racks of white chips. Things got serious.

Joey ended up winning this pick-up tournament. I remember it clearly because he made what I still consider to be the best call I've seen to eliminate Chino. Joey started the hand raising Chino's blind from the button with 7♠6♠. Chino defended. The flop came out Q♦4♥5♠. Rheem checked and Joey threw in a continuation bet, which Chino called. The turn brought the T♠. Rheem checked again to Joey, who didn't let up. He fired a pot-size bet at Chino, a semi-bluff with his straight-flush draw. Chino thought for a few seconds before calling to see the final card.

The river came a blank for Joey. Another ten completed neither his straight nor flush. Joey was left with a busted draw and a seven for high. He studied Chino, waiting for his turn to act.

Rheem broke the silence. "I'm all-in." He shoved his whole stack of chips into the middle of the carpeted floor we were using as our table.

Chino was stoic, but Joey stared him down with an intensity I haven't seen since. Chino couldn't help but break. He let out a nervous chuckle. "Damn, Joe! You're making me nervous here. Fold or call already!"

"Ok, I call."

Chino shook his head. "Nice call. You got me."

Joey just sat there, indian-style on the carpet, waiting for Chino to either turn over his hand or muck. Finally, Chino turned it over... 2♠3♠.

"Ha! I knew it." Joey turned over his hand and raked the pot. He called Chino Rheem with 7-high, and it was good.

The three of us looked at Bartholdi with disbelief. Chino let out a disgusted sound, then mumbled.

“You must have seen my cards... you had to have seen my cards.”

Joey laughed this accusation off, explaining confidently how he had put Chino on exactly the hand he had.

“You wouldn’t have shoved with any other hand! You couldn’t have had an ace or a pair, or you would have checked and tried to catch a bluff. And you couldn’t have had a ten or a boat, or you would have taken more time to bet.”

Chino sulked off into the corner of the room to roll a blunt. He watched Joey finish Ewee and me off, winning the four twenties in the middle of the floor. This was poker at its finest. Downstairs, thousands of players were competing to show the world their poker acumen. But there we were in a smoke-filled Tunica hotel room, four of poker’s future champions, competing just with each other to show we were worthy of everything fortune could grant us.

Four months after our hotel pick-up game, Joey won the \$25k WPT Season Championship, pulling moves the poker world had never seen before. Seven years later, Chino would win the same event.

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A day or two after our pick-up tournament, the Tunica WPT main event started. With 327 players ponying up their \$10,000 buy-in, the stage was set for the winner to walk away with almost a million. I struggled through the first day, never gaining traction. It was all I could do just to make it to Day 2. I finished with a hair over 17,000 tournament chips, near the bottom of the 163 players who had survived.

Bartholdi hadn’t made it through. He was nursing a beer at the bar and I joined him after bagging up my chips. I was feeling discouraged, but tried not to show it. It would have been insensitive to complain. Joey was drinking away his own bust-out pain, which was far worse than anything I brought to the bar.

A few quiet minutes went by. Then suddenly a semi-familiar chatter joined us at the bar. It was Rod, the LSAT tutor we had met a day earlier. He was giddy, literally bouncing on the barstool he took next to me.

“Did you play today?” I already knew the answer, but asked anyway.

“Dutch, I played the best poker of my life down there. I ended the day with 54,000 in chips... that has to be one of the chip leaders. I’m going to win this tournament, Dutch. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my entire life. Everything was coming together for me. It was amazing. It was like I could feel the cards before they came out, and I could see through every move the other players at my table were trying to make against me. Blah Blah Blah. Blah Blah Blah.”

Rod droned on like this, non-stop for at least ten minutes. He didn’t even stop to ask how Joey or I had finished. Rod only stopped talking when he saw Todd Brunson and Gavin Smith at the head of the Gold Strike bar. Gavin was in a great mood, finishing the day with a huge bag of chips. Todd was a casualty.

Rod turned to us and finally asked a question. “Isn’t that Doyle Brunson’s son?” We affirmed it was. Then, as Rod left to introduce himself, Joey and I grabbed our drinks and left the bar.

As we walked out of the casino floor, past the gift shop and towards the elevators, Joe shook his head and shot me an incredulous look. “What do you think that dude’s on?”

“I don’t think he’s on anything, man. I think he’s just happy to be here.”

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The next day continued and after a few hours of play, Rod was moved to my table. He gave me a smile and a knowing nod, as if we were co-conspirators in this together. Then an orbit later, he killed my tournament hopes, calling my short-stack all-in shove and flipping over A9o. When the board ran out, Rod’s

overcards finished ahead of the small pocket pair I had rested my tournament life on.

Rod knocked the table as I stood up to walk away. Then he started rambling.

“Amazing. Isn’t it amazing, Dutch, that it would go down like this? That just last night I was telling you how I was going to win this tournament, and then we sit down at the same table and I’m the one who knocks you out... how much clearer could the universe be.”

Rod kept talking, but his voice faded as I exited the tournament area.

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I kept thinking about Rod for the rest of the day. He was so annoying, yet he seemed familiar. I couldn’t quite place it. I knew him. But where did I know him from? How did I know him?

The answer hit me like a cold shower. I was too wrapped up in my own life story that I couldn’t see what was right in front of my face. I didn’t know Rod from Adam. But I knew what was eating him. We were the same, him and I. The same demons, the same defect. Bipolar I.

Rod was a manic, rapid cycling out of control. Manic Rod.

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At the end of Day 2, I headed to the Gold Strike bar to intercept Manic Rod. Joey came along with me. I had told Bartholdi what I suspected, and said we should talk to Rod and make sure he was going to be ok. Whether he was driven by compassion or boredom, I can’t really say. But for better or worse, Joey was going to be my partner in this task.

The remaining tournament runners started filing out of the playing area. It occurred to me that Rod might have already been eliminated from the tournament. If so, he wouldn’t be passing the bar with the rest of the survivors

and we might have been wasting our time nursing our beers waiting for him to show up. I immediately dismissed the idea. The manic brain seeks stimulation, and I was sure Rod would seek it in the bar we were sitting at.

I was right. I saw Rod walking erratically with the rest of the players. I waved at him, and he recognized us and smiled. Rod broke into a near run to join us. He immediately started filling us in on his tournament progress and his plans for how he was going to spend his winnings.

It was worse than I thought.

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It's so hard to deal with a person going through a manic episode. Trying to help Rod felt like karma for every time I had put someone in the same position. Rod was still functioning. His hypomanic state hadn't quite tipped to full blown psychotic mania. But he was getting close. I recognized the symptoms and knew it was just a matter of time.

It takes a great deal of patience, talking to crazy. I tried my best to interject small questions and statements between the gaps in Manic Rod's verbal flow where he'd be forced to stop and take a breath. Each of the following exchanges took an eternity, but I abridge them here.

"Rod, are you on any sort of drug? Like cocaine or meth?"

He wasn't.

"Rod, have you ever been diagnosed with bipolar disorder?"

He hadn't.

"Rod, I'm pretty sure you are going through the beginning stages of a manic episode. I know this because I've been in your shoes. I've felt the exact same way you feel right now, and buddy I can tell you are two sleepless nights away from full-blown psychosis. I think you need to get some help."

He disagreed. He'd never felt better in his life. He started to become a bit aggressive, suggesting Joey and I were just jealous because we were out of the WPT main event and he was going strong.

"You're right, Rod. You're still in, and I hope you take it down."

I took his cell number and told Rod I'd check on him the next day. I encouraged him to try and get some sleep. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, and there was some tough competition ahead of him. Not least of which were Gavin Smith and Michael Mizrachi, who were the only players to have bagged more than 300,000 chips.

Joey and I headed back to our Gold Strike room to rest up. The next day was a weekend, which meant the chips would be flying. Joey was going to play some cash games, and I was resting up for a WSOP Circuit event next door at the Grand Casino. It was a \$3k H.O.R.S.E. against what I knew would be fast company.

I didn't lose sleep thinking about Rod. Maybe I was wrong and what I thought was severe hypomania was just his baseline personality. It's not like I had a degree in Psychology. What did I really know about it?

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"The world don't move to the beat of just one drum."

Alan Thicke

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Besides *Different Strokes*, the television theme which contains the line I just quoted, Alan Thicke also wrote the theme song for *The Facts of Life*. I didn't know that until just now. You take the good, you take the bad, you take them both and there you have. I still can't believe it. Alan Thicke wrote both of those songs. The TV dad on *Growing Pains* and the real-life dad of mega-popstar Robin Thicke.

What a talent.



I ended up at the final table of the next day's WSOP Circuit event, which only drew fifty players. It was an abysmal showing, just over six tables. I had expected four times as many might show up for the Saturday H.O.R.S.E. tournament. The casinos were packed with players who had flown in for both the WPT and WSOP. More than 400 of them had signed up for the 11am No-Limit event. But when 3pm rolled around, and the higher buy-in mixed event fired off, the turnout was depressing.

It was evidence of the changing game. Television had painted poker into a corner. Nobody cared about Razz or Limit Omaha Hi-Low. The ratings said No-Limit Hold'em was the future. Amateurs loved the simplicity of the two-card game, and pros followed the money.

It was a tough field, with Carlos Mortenson rising above the rest of us to capture the circuit ring. The turnout was so low that the tournament director decided to change the event from a two-day format to a single day. It was around 9pm when the last of us merged onto the final table to finish the tourney. I busted 7th, which didn't even pay double the buy-in.

When I lost my final hand, I looked up to see Manic Rod watching from the rail. He seemed less animated, which was a good sign. But he was smiling, which was a bad sign. Smiling wasn't in character for someone who had just busted from a \$10,000 WPT event.

"Nice job, Dutch! I'll meet you in the bar!"

I went through the exit process, filling out the tax forms at the cage so I could claim my min-cash. Then I headed to the bar and ordered a drink next to Rod. I was in a sour mood after Pat Poels, now a double bracelet winner, put a bad beat on me with a Stud hand we both knew he shouldn't have been playing past third street.

“You’ll never guess what I did last night.” He didn’t wait for me to hazard one. “I watched *Elizabethtown* three times. You know... the new Kirsten Dunst and Orlando Bloom movie? I think I have it all figured out, Dutch.

“And the best part is Cameron Crowe and I are going to be really good friends!”

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Joey met me in the Grand casino bar, telling me about his plans to join Joe Cassidy, Jean-Robert Bellande and Todd Brunson on a weeknight barhop into Memphis. Somehow, we all ended up in the same courtesy van together, with Manic Rod sandwiched between Joey and me in the backseat. Two minutes into the trip, I realized this was not going to end well.

Rod wouldn’t stop talking. The rest of the pros in the car stayed mostly silent. Joey and I just stared out into the night through our respective windows, inwardly cringing at the scene we had created. Brunson and Cassidy were cool as cucumbers, and didn’t show even the slightest bit of emotion. You would have thought they were on any other normal drive. Bellande, on the other hand, stared at Rod with a mortified and confused expression. It was the same look Bellande might have if he was watching a vaudeville freak show, and he was the only one in the audience who realized the kid in the backseat had scales and two heads.

Rod started becoming aggressively confrontational with Joe Cassidy over some meaningless point he was trying to make. I’ll never forget how cool Cassidy was able to remain. In the stillest voice you can imagine, Cassidy responded to Rod’s irritable rant.

“I’m not trying to confront you, dude. I’m not saying you don’t know what you’re talking about. But I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

It was a disarming statement. For just a moment, Rod fell silent. I imagined Joe Cassidy as a passenger on a commercial airliner, with both jet engines in flames and the plane descending into a nosedive. Various alarms would go off, and passengers around him would be screaming and crying in terror. But not

Joe Cassidy. He would calmly and collectedly reach for the oxygen mask now dangling in front of him, pull the rubber strap around his head, and slowly tighten the ends. What a pro. I could see why Bartholdi loved him.

Cassidy would finally get his WSOP bracelet in 2012. It was in the \$5,000 Omaha Hi-Low event, the same one Brett had claimed in 2005. It was a tough finish, with Scotty Nguyen placing second and Phil Ivey rounding out third. Until his win, Cassidy was leading the list of the best pros who had never won gold.

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When we got to Memphis, the pros decided to ditch the manic. Cassidy, Bellande and Brunson had all suffered through almost a full hour ride with Rod, hostage to his incessant nonsense. They were going to have a fun night on Beale street and Manic Rod wasn't invited.

We could have joined them. But as much I wanted to, I couldn't just leave Rod to his own devices in Memphis. He had cashed a few hours earlier for close to twenty thousand dollars, which he was carrying in his pocket. And he had his passport with him. Joey stayed behind with me and we tried to salvage the night.

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How do you talk to a person going through a manic episode? Keep it light and don't be confrontational. Manics don't process thoughts the same way sane and rational people do. Everything was magic to Rod. He wasn't quite to the psychotic stage of mania, but he was well into the delusional. Joey and I talked Rod into one of the Beale Street bars. We bought a pitcher and tried to work out a plan.

Manics will take any excuse to pick up a phone and reach out to someone they care about. So I asked about his family, and Rod told me he had a sister. I suggested maybe he should give her a call, which he was eager to do. A few minutes into their conversation, I asked Rod if I could talk to her. He handed

over the phone and then turned around to flirt up some girls waiting to order a drink.

Rod's sister sounded worried. I asked if he had ever been diagnosed with bipolar, and she told me he hadn't. I told her I was pretty sure he was going bat-shit crazy and he needed help, and she should probably get down here as soon as she could. She said she wanted to talk to their parents, so I gave her my number. He wasn't too far gone yet, I told her, but in three or four days he could be getting gang-raped in a Turkish prison... or worse.

After I hung up the phone, I realized Memphis was a big mistake. Beale Street was full of lights, noise and potential disasters. When dealing with a manic, it's best to try and remove as much stimulation as possible. I needed to get Rod back to Tunica. I had an idea.

"What do you think about going to see some naked girls, Rod? Have you been to the Prancing Pony?"

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The place I was thinking about was actually just called "The Pony", and is a strip club halfway between Memphis and the Tunica riverboats. I took a chance Rod might have been a fan of *The Hobbit*, which as it turns out he was. He knew the Prancing Pony was the bar where Frodo and the other hobbits were supposed to meet Gandalf. A manic is living an adventure, and they'll see life imitating art everywhere they look. Rod was ready to go. After a long and annoying 25 minute taxi ride, we arrived at the Pony.

We convinced Rod to pay the cab fare and our cover charges for the club. It's hard work keeping a manic out of trouble. We could take a small fee. We got a couple pitchers and a few lap dances, courtesy of Rod. Before long, he disappeared into the VIP room with an older stripper, who even in the dark light of the club couldn't hide her stretch marks.

Rod's sister called back. She had called their dad, who woke up a psychiatrist friend of his. The three decided Rod's dad and sister would fly into Memphis

the next night and meet us at the Gold Strike, where they'd pick up Rod and get him on a flight back home. Joey and I just had to keep him out of trouble until we could pass him off to his family. I hung up and poured myself and Joey another beer, enjoying the scenery and the silence.

Two hours later, Rod came back to our table. He was in a great mood, but more agitated than ever.

“Guys... I just got engaged! We're going to get married on Wednesday. I need you guys to be my groomsmen. Her real name is Amber and I'm going to have a stepson and he's going to grow up to be the most famous musician in history...”

He kept talking drivel, but I tuned him out. Joey looked at me and said he was ready to go. We led Rod to the parking lot, caught a cab, and headed back to Tunica.

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When the three of us got back to the Gold Strike, the hotel was surrounded by police cars. The front glass windows of the lobby had been shattered. Little shards of glass were everywhere, and a few policemen were taping off the entrance.

The three of us got out of the cab and found a different way into the hotel. When we passed the lobby on our way to the elevators, we saw what had happened. There was a car inside the lobby which had crashed through the entrance. The police were leading an older white male away from the scene in handcuffs. I saw Eric Mizrachi talking to one of the officers.

“Ewee! What the hell happened?”

“Holy shit, Dutchy... Grinder made the final table. We were all celebrating in the bar. Then Chino and I decided to go up and blaze one, you know. So we're walking through here towards our room when all of the sudden we hear this

huge CRASH and a car is speeding right towards us. It was crazy! We had to jump out of the way.”

I'd find out more details later. The buzz around the tables was that the man they arrested had lost quite a chunk in the \$25/50 PLO game. He tried to recoup his losses at the craps table and blew the rest of his life savings. Eighty grand in the space of two hours. He blamed it on the casino, and the way he decided to get even was to walk outside of the entrance and hop into one of the cars in valet. He started the ignition, drove straight through the glass doors, and proceeded to spin donuts in the Gold Strike lobby.



Joey and I brought Rod back to our hotel room, where the plan was to wait until his dad and sister showed up. They said they would be in Tunica in just over 12 hours. Joey and I called down for a rollaway bed for Rod, who seemed to be slowing down. We hoped he would get a little sleep and let us do the same. For awhile, he did.

But a half hour later, Rod was awake and pacing the floor. He kept letting out deep sighs and then murmuring to himself. Joey and I both sat up in our respective beds, frustrated that we weren't getting the sleep we wanted.

Rod's mania was going in a religious direction. He started explaining to us how he was the embodiment of the second coming, and we were going to be apostles. He was also going to bring Todd Brunson and Cameron Crowe into the Manic Rod Apostle Club. He was doing a lot of rhyming and alliteration. These are called "clang associations" in the medical literature, and clanging is a symptom of things getting worse.

I tried to reason with him, even though I knew it was pointless.

“Rod, just look at yourself for a minute. You're going psychotic here. You are in full-blown mania. This is classic... delusions of grandeur, racing thoughts...”

“No, Dutch. Never felt better. My brain is perfectly sane.”

“You know why I’m sure you’re manic, Rod? Because you can’t stop talking. You haven’t shut up except to breathe for a half hour. I know you’re so far manic because you couldn’t keep your mouth shut if your life depended on it!”

Rod took this as a challenge.

“Oh yes I could, Dutch. Would and could. I’ll even bet you that I can.”

I thought about this for a second. Then I pulled out a hundred dollar bill.

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Joey once told me a story. He was eighteen or nineteen and had just come into Vegas to live with his dad, an old-school Binion’s dealer and classic degenerate gambler. He taught Joey everything he could about cards, and about the hustles and cons he would come across in the world.

One day, Joey was walking down Fremont and saw a couple of street hustlers running the Three-card Monte. Joey knew the con well.

Two red aces and one black queen are mixed up in front of a player (i.e. the mark), who is supposed to pick which of the cards is the black queen. Usually, the dealer uses a slight where he picks up two cards in one hand and makes it look like he’s throwing the queen down when in reality he’s throwing one of the aces. So the player usually follows the wrong card from the beginning.

Joey saw right through the move. His dad had shown him how it was performed, and after watching the street hustler make the move against another player (who Joey of course realized was a shill in the scam), Joey knew he could follow the queen and beat the hustler at his own game. He sat down and put a twenty dollar bill on top of the dealer’s twenty.

The street dealer went through the routine, Joey playing the part of a sucker. With his eyes, he followed the card the dealer intended him to. When the mixing stopped, Joey started towards the card the hustler intended him to pick.

He fainted for the decoy card, then his hand quickly changed course and Joey turned over the black queen.

Joey snickered and reached for the cash. In one fluid motion, the other “player” in the game stomped his foot down on the two bills and sucker punched Joey. The dealer scooped up the money and the two hustlers booked it, sprinting away down Fremont street. It was a new variation on the classic confidence game.



“Ok, Rod. Let’s turn on this Cameron Crowe movie you keep raving about. *Elizabethtown*, right? I’ll bet you this hundred that you can’t stay completely quiet through the whole movie.”

Rod became even more agitated. He pulled out a wad of hundreds from his front pocket. It was his whole bankroll... or what was left of it, anyway. Perhaps he had done some gambling at the Gold Strike after he cashed for \$18,000 in the WPT, or maybe Rod had given way too much money to his stripper fiancé. Whatever happened, his \$18,000 roll looked like it had shrunk to less than five grand.

He counted it out loud in front of us. “1, 2, 3, 4... 18, 19, 20... 35, 36, 37. Ok, I’ll bet you \$3,742 to your \$100 that I can stay quiet through the whole movie.”

He slapped the whole wad onto the rollaway bed. I put my hundred on top.

“You got action, Rod. I honestly hope I lose this one.”

For the first time in what seemed like days, Rod was silent. I picked up the remote and switched to the pay-per-view movies on the Gold Strike television. Rod walked slowly to the corner of the room and sat down on a cushioned chair facing the TV. He was beaming a confident smile.

Scrolling through the movie selection, I stopped at *Elizabethtown*. Starring Orlando Bloom and Kirsten Dunst. Directed by Cameron Crowe. Running time of 123 minutes. *Please let him win*. I pushed the order button.

Joey had been relaxing against the headboard of his bed, coolly watching this interaction play out. “Let me get half that action, Dutch.”

“You got it, bro.”

Joey reached into his jeans on the floor beside him and pulled out two twenties and a ten, then reached across the gap between our beds and handed over his half. Joey returned to his sitting position and prepared to watch the movie.

As the opening credits rolled, Rod began to rock back and forth in his seat. His lips were pursed tight, as he continued to beam a smile. On our television screen, Orlando Bloom sat on a stationary bike, staring at a knife he had duct taped to the handlebars. Rod got out of his chair and paced a few steps, then sat back down.

The movie continued. Rod got out of his chair again. He started pacing back and forth, letting out a long sigh. Then he sat back down. Rod was doing everything he could to keep quiet. He had both of his hands covering his mouth.

Joey and I just ignored him. We kept watching the movie, irritated and worn out. And then, less than ten minutes in, Manic Rod cracked.

“Ok guys, before we start the bet... I just want to say one thi-”

Before he could finish, Joey sprang to life.

“Too easy!”

He boomed those words as he scooped the \$3,842 dollars sitting on the rollaway. Faster than any bank teller, Joey counted out two stacks of \$1,921. He handed me one of the stacks and put the other stack into his jeans on the floor. Then

he was back into his relaxed viewing position as if it had never happened. Joey performed this chain with such fluidity that one might think he had practiced this move hundreds of times. He had collected our money with the grace of a Z-boy in Dogtown, skateboarding off the side of an abandoned pool, into the deep end and back out again.

Rod's money was gone before he could even object, which he immediately got up to do. He started storming towards us in a manic aggression. He looked like he was getting ready for a fight.

“What are you doing? The bet hadn't started!”

Joey jumped out of his bed and showed him what aggression really looked like. Weighing in at only 135 lb., wearing only a pair of boxers, Joey puffed up like a peacock and pointed his finger right at Rod, stopping him in his tracks.

“*NO!* The bet *HAD* started! And you know how I know it started? Because for the last three days you haven't shut up. And then, just now, you struggled for a full seven minutes to keep your fool mouth shut. But you couldn't do it.

“So the bet *had* started. You know it and we know it. You lost and now it's over. So *SIT DOWN!*”

He yelled at Rod like a dog owner who has just found his favorite trainers chewed to shreds. Rod looked stunned. He walked back to the cushioned chair and sat. Joey went back to leaning against the headboard as if nothing had happened.

Perhaps losing the bet was a wakeup call to Rod. Maybe Joey had poured a bucket of ice cold reality onto his delusions. There was no underlying meaning to any of it and the universe doesn't pick sides in the quiet game.

As the movie played on, Rod began to cry.

“There by the grace of God goes someone else.”

Christopher Hitchens

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The reprieve from mania was short-lived if it happened at all. Rod was bouncing around our room for another eight hours before the time his sister and dad met us at the Gold Strike. Joey and I did our best to keep him occupied but not too stimulated. We watched a string of in-room movies and ordered room service. We encouraged him to get some sleep, which he did in 15 to 30 minutes spurts, before returning back to discussing his plans for the new world and naming more people in his fellowship.

By the time his family claimed him, Mizrachi had split the WPT main event with Scotty Nguyen. Around the time Rod was heading home, Joey and I would go back to Memphis to meet up with the Hollywood boys for the party at Platinum Plus. The club was packed with every player on the circuit. They’ve since shut the place down for giving a new definition to the term “dirty south”. When the sun rose the next morning, Joey and I caught the first flight back to Vegas.

I’ve hung out with Rod since his episode in Tunica. He got the help he needed. Got on some meds, and struggled with them like all of us do. Gained some weight, got off the meds, went manic a few more times before deciding enough was enough. What’s a little lithium, anyway?

Rod and I chilled just this last year in Vegas. He came out for a weekend WSOP event and we spent several hours playing video poker for free beers. It felt comfortable and natural, and he is a ton of fun to hang around when he’s not drinking the manic punch.

It’s going on a decade now since that Tunica trip. Most of the memories have slipped away, but the strongest one remains of those few minutes in our room when Joey and I won our silence bet against Rod. Even though it was admittedly predatory to keep the money, it wasn’t guilt I felt.

Rather, it was equal measures of relief and pride. I was proud of Joey for sticking up for us both, for not taking another sucker punch as we watched another bet go the wrong way. And I was relieved that for once I wasn't on the losing end of a new version of the Three-card Monte.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Moving the Goalposts

“Poker doesn’t owe us anything. We owe poker everything.”

Doyle Brunson

Daniel Kahneman is a Nobel-winning psychologist and the father of behavioral economics. Along with Amos Tversky, he founded a concept called “Prospect Theory”. Kahneman’s work has heavy applications to poker. There has never been a psychological theory that has better defined the what and why of poker tilt.

Let’s define poker tilt as the mental state a poker player is in when they make poor decisions in a hand they normally would not make. So what does Prospect Theory say about it? Well, one thing Prospect Theory says is people are risk-averse when it comes to locking in a gain and are risk-seeking when it comes to avoiding a loss.

Let’s think about this for a second. How many times have we seen this at a table? A player comes into a flop with suited connectors and is pleased to actually flop the flush (the odds of which are 117 to 1). Rather than try to milk their opponent for the maximum by betting amounts likely to get called, they shove their stack into the middle in order to “take it down right then and there”. And then there’s the other extreme. A player whiffs the flop but still makes a big call with over cards, chasing one of those six outs rather than giving up and accepting the loss. Both of these are examples of poker tilt.

Sammy Farha is a three-time WSOP bracelet winner. He finished runner-up to Moneymaker for the championship and knocked me out of that same Main Event. By any objective measure, Sammy is a world-class player. He wrote a book several years ago called *Farha on Omaha* where one of the strategies he

gives his readers is to play very tight at the end of a winning session in order to lock-in a profit. Farha gives the example of a time he folded aces pre-flop in a Pot-Limit Omaha cash game, pointing out that it was the end of his session and he didn't want to risk going home a loser for the day.

Granted, pocket aces in a PLO game isn't a huge hand... but inasmuch as there are "monsters" in Pot-Limit Omaha, this hand would qualify. It's horrible advice to fold it, and Farha rightly received a good chunk of criticism for this part of his book. In his defense, Prospect Theory tells us his fuzzy thinking is par for the course. People, including Sammy, like guaranteed wins. They are willing to pass up positive-EV situations in order to lock-in a gain. And they are willing to take negative-EV gambles in order to avoid a sure loss.

There's a lot more to Prospect Theory. One aspect states that the sensitivity to losses diminishes the bigger they get. We can see this in poker all the time, when a player passes what Mike Caro termed "the threshold of misery." They've reached their maximum pain level and are numb to further losses during the session.

Another aspect of Prospect Theory is the idea of loss aversion, which summed up simply means that it feels about twice as bad losing a quarter of a million dollars as it feels good to win it. I can tell you from experience this is true.

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Loss aversion. It's a powerful concept and is why anytime someone asks me whether I think they should make a run at going pro, I always respond with a resounding negative. Forget for a second that the majority of players are losers, and most people making a run at going pro end up going broke instead. Let's assume you can beat the game and be successful at it. You still shouldn't do it! Why? Because of *loss aversion*.

This is what's wrong with poker. Loss aversion means we react heavier to losses than we do to gains. Put another way, you get one happy unit when you gain \$1 and you drop two happy units when you lose \$1. Every time you win a pot, some poor loser feels twice as bad as you feel good. Then every time you lose,

the joy you've built up from a corresponding win is outweighed by the negative feeling that comes with an equal loss.

Both at the micro level and the macro level, whether you are looking at the individual player or the player base as a whole, the net misery keeps on growing.

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After Tunica in 2006, the lease was up on my Las Vegas house. Bobby and I decided to go back to Missouri for awhile to be closer to family. My mom was going through a rough time. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer and was dealing with the sickening effects of radiation therapy. And after putting up with infidelity for years, she had finally stopped coming up with excuses on why she couldn't leave my step-father.

So we came back home. There wasn't much reason to be in Vegas back then, really. We multi-tabled the online cash games, which were just as Fischman had described. Like having an ATM in your living room. So much being deposited and lost by weekend warriors seeing Mike Sexton on television, inviting them to join the party, or watching Joe Hachem screaming "Aussie! Aussie! Aussie!" upon winning \$7.5 million while wearing a PokerStars patch.

It was the big year for poker, the height of the poker boom. It was before the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act and the exodus of Party Poker from the US. It was before Black Friday and the shutdown of the big three US-facing sites: PokerStars, Full Tilt, and UB/Absolute. The WSOP Main Event would see it's biggest prize pool in 2006, with Jamie Gold winning \$12,000,000 for his first place finish. The numbers have been trending downward ever since.

In April 2006, the WPT Championship Event would see it's second biggest prize pool. A total of 605 entrants each put up \$25,000 to generate a prize-pool of \$14.6 million with a first-place of \$3,760,165. Joey Bartholdi took it down.

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There is the old gambler's joke, a reply to the question of "how did you lose your money?" The answer: "slowly at first, and then all at once."

That's how it happens, every time. It's how Joey lost his WPT money. It's how I lost the cash I'd win for my first bracelet. I assume it's how both Jamie Gold's, and the next year's Main Event winner Jerry Yang's fortunes were lost, both of whose bracelets have since been auctioned off.



Bobby and I were playing live cash games in St. Louis when Joey's final table ended with his win. We jumped on a plane to Vegas to join the celebration. His party lasted for a month. He bought every single one of his friends a pair of Heelies, the tennis shoe brand with wheels in the heels. I had seen kids rolling down a Walmart aisle in a pair, but didn't realize they made them for adults until Joey presented me with my very own in size 11.

Joey sprung for a trip to Mexico with a dozen of his closest friends. Then a trip to Los Angeles, where we all spent a day at Six Flags Magic Mountain and a few more days on a San Diego beach resort, burning through joints filled with the finest California Kush. It was during one of those weed-induced afternoons that Joey lost his WPT championship bracelet somewhere in the sand.

It was a beautiful piece of hardware. Losing his bracelet foreshadowed things to come. Just like his tournament trophy, Joey disregarded the money he won. He blew it on temporary and trivial things like designer clothes, tables at Empire, and trips to New York. He ignored the important things, like buying a house.

Joey blew through his entire win with not much to show for it. We all stood by and watched him do it. What else is there to do? Maybe we should have encouraged him to put some money into an IRA, or invest in a few Subway franchises. *Did you know, Joe, that the historical average return for the stock market has been between 9% and 10%? That's even adjusted for inflation! As your friend, I'd advise you to put your money into an index fund.* When a guy just realized a 14,900% ROI on his \$25k, this type of conservative advice will usually be met with ridicule. A poker player's idea of an investment is buying into a bigger game.

The whale's chunk of Joey's new fortune would be lost in the Bellagio high limit section. It's a recurring theme which happens over and over again. When a poker player wins a championship tournament, it's easy for them to believe they are the best in the world. So they sit in the biggest cash games, which bear as much resemblance to tournament poker as a marathon does to a sprint. They might lose millions, blaming it on variance, as they mistake a week's worth of great play as proof their skills on the felt are unmatched. Most of Joey's losses went to Chau Giang, proving consistency trumps creativity every time.

In some ways, Joey was actually worse off than he was before his seven-figure score. He had become accustomed to a different level of expenses, a higher monthly nut. Plus, now he had an image to maintain. When he would go back to grinding the \$2/5 No-Limit game at the Wynn and Bellagio, the poker forums would buzz with railbird chatter, the threads all saying the same thing:

"Joe Bartholdi confirmed busto!"

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Life Lesson #36
There is always a game too big.

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It's never as much as they think, the amount we blow.

Joey only had half of his action in his WPT event. He handed the other half of his score to Cassidy. The same story goes with most of the other big winners in poker. Jamie Gold only had half. Moneymaker. Raymer. On paper, Antonio Esfandiari became the biggest winner in poker with his \$18 million dollar score in the 2012 One Drop event. Only the fans think he had anywhere close to half of himself.

There's a ceiling to how much you can make in this game and it's lower than the public might think. While the average tournament buy-ins keep getting bigger, there isn't a pro whose bankroll is big enough to sustain the variance in

\$100,000 buy-in events... at least not a pro who has made their bankroll from playing poker.

When you look at other sports figures, poker is still small-time. Matt Holliday, the left-fielder for the St. Louis Cardinals, made more than \$16 million last year. He placed 90th on the Forbes list of the 100 top paid athletes. There isn't a poker player on the list.

The top actors make more than the top athletes. Robert Downey Jr. made \$75 million last year alone. And why not? He's a great entertainer. Even comparing poker against musicians is just as disheartening. At only 20 years old, Justin Bieber has an estimated net worth of over \$100 million. There isn't a poker player in the world who has made nine figures playing the game.

Granted, there might be some poker players who use their winnings as a springboard for bigger scores. Perhaps they'll cross the eight-figure line through endorsements or ownership interests in companies. I imagine the Full Tilt principals all crossed that mark. Lederer, Ferguson, Ivey... all of them must have been well on their way to Bieber money before Black Friday. The online tracking sites have Ivey, Antonius and Galfond all above \$10 million in online cash game winnings. I want to believe all three of these guys have eight figures in the bank. But I don't.

In these and similar cases, poker was just the launching pad, a way to get from point A to point B. Poker is not the end goal. It's not the destination. Treating it as such leads to disappointment and ruin. We set goals for ourselves and when we reach them, we move the goalposts.

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I remember one of those Bartholdi-financed sushi dinners, right after his WPT score. His future brother-in-law, Brandon Meyers, presented an optimistic hypothetical.

“What if poker just keeps growing? What if every year, the Main Event just keeps on getting more and more people willing to pop up the \$10,000 entry

fee? That's the track it's on... you have Moneymaker winning \$2.5 million in '03, Raymer winning \$5 million in '04, Hachem winning \$7.5 million last year. What if it just keeps getting bigger and bigger every year until a hundred years from now, the World Series of Poker is a year-long event with a few million people all ponying up the buy-in. And every year the new richest guy in the world is the one who wins?"

You gotta love stoned thoughts. After a bit of contemplation, I returned with my own optimistic hypothetical.

"What if in the future we program robots to do all the work in the world, and the only thing left for us is to play poker?"

Bobby didn't waste much time before replying.

"Then we could teach the robots to play cards and we wouldn't have to do *anything at all!*"

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Going into the 2006 World Series, I had a lot to live up to. I was the anchor of The Crew, the dead weight dragging the ship along the sandy ocean floor. I was the one without a title win under my belt. Then on June 2nd, I'd make the impossible shot. It was Event #5, the \$2,500 No-Limit Six-Handed prelim. It was one of the few events slotted to be televised on ESPN.

By all rights, I should have been eliminated well before the final table. A few levels into Day 1, I found myself nearly all-in after flopping top two pair, only to be facing a bottom set. It was a bad situation where I'd be crippled unless I filled up. The chances of a good outcome, of hitting one of the four outs I'd need for a full house, were slightly above 16%. I might as well have gotten my stack all-in pre-flop with an underpair against aces. The odds are about the same.

Sometimes those long shots go your way. I hit the boat and didn't look back.

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As I bagged up my chips after Day 1, good for second behind Negreanu, I returned to my room at the Wild Wild West. I had arrived in Vegas on another downswing. It was just a small step up from the hostel room I had shared during my first Series only four years before. I returned to the Rio the next day, focused and determined to put forth my best effort.

There were a lot of great players I'd have to charge through. Danny led the pack, and along with him towards the top was Gavin Smith. There was Karina Jett, Kathy Liebert, Gavin Griffin, Mike Matusow, Freddy Deeb, Rick Fuller, Richard Brodie, and Thor Hansen. The tourney was stacked with talent. With only four tables left, I busted Erick Lindgren with a pocket pair against his all-in shove with Ace-rag. All day, surviving near the bottom of the pack, was last year's Big Dance champion: Joe Hachem.

The ESPN cameras were darting around the room, picking up footage of the remaining tables. This had been a good pick for television. There were a number of story arcs for them to cover, skilled pros to follow and upcoming unknowns to introduce to the world.

At three tables left, the cameras focused on Negreanu's table. He had just gotten the bulk of his stack into the middle with top pair against an opponent's pocket rockets. It looked to be a devastating turn of events for Danny. The turn came a blank and Negreanu was looking for a five-outer... two remaining jacks would give him trips and three remaining kings would give him two pair. The river was a jack, saving Negreanu from being crippled and shipping the chip lead his way.

Negreanu's opponent, David Shallow, was able to get one of the top players in the world to put his tournament life on the line with a 17% dog only to get rewarded with a disgusting beat. Shallow would go on to win both a WCOOP in 2010 and WPT title in 2012. He's cashed for around \$1 million.

Yet chances are you've never heard of David Shallow. I'll admit I hadn't before looking him up, and I'd bet a buy-in Danny wouldn't remember him either, nor the details of the hand so influential on this relatively unknown player's

life. Such is the power of television, and the weakness of our poker memory. We remember the beats we take, forget the ones we give.

But Shallow remembers. I'm certain of that. He's relived this beat in his head hundreds of times, told it dozens of times, and imagined how his life would have turned out had the river card been a queen. Everything would have been different for him. Maybe better, maybe worse. But different.

My life would have been different as well. So would have Danny's. So would have yours.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Life Lesson #37
The only difference between a good player
and a great one is the river.

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Scotty Dinsmore, a friend from Missouri, had assigned himself the job of coach and scout. He stood on the rail watching my table and the other tables during the bulk of Day 2. During each break, he'd follow me out to the back parking lot and give me updates on the competition while we both fed our nicotine habit.

Negreanu had his own rail during the tournament. First was his publicist and manager, who was busy getting Danny as much press as possible in support of his upcoming video game (Stacked), training site (VTPoker) and card room (FullContactPoker). Second was Little Matt.

Little Matt was a teenager from Missouri who had been badly burned over most of his body a few years before. The accident had messed him up. His face had melted. Before it happened, Matt was really into sports. Afterwards, left with the debilitating reminders of the fire, he replaced basketball with poker. His father, Big Matt, had contacted Danny the year before to tell him that he

was their favorite poker player. Danny had gone on a whale-watching day trip with Little Matt and the two became friends.

Someone thought it would be a good idea to publicize the relationship. He had come to Vegas to watch Danny compete. Since he was just a kid, they had to get special permission to allow Little Matt inside the tournament area. Little Matt was there on the rail for almost the whole tournament, rooting on his poker hero. The ESPN cameras ate it up. Every break, Danny would rush to the rail and update Little Matt and his publicist on his chip count.



I have to admit, I have mixed feelings about Danny and Little Matt. On the one hand, I'd like to think the best of Negreanu and believe his befriending of Little Matt was entirely selfless. But I can't help feeling like it was exploitive and self-serving. I'm not saying it would have been kinder just to ignore Big Matt's email. I just couldn't shake the image of Senators praying in front of the Capital building. By all means, reach out to the kid... but you don't need to make it a segment on ESPN.

People all the time ask me what players are like in real life. Is Hellmuth really a brat away from the tables? Is Matusow really a loudmouth? By and large, there is no act with pros. The way we play is the way we are. If there is an act, it is only in the editing room where producers can isolate and condense a day's worth of moments to show what they want.

Whenever people ask about Negreanu, I always am surprised to hear how the general impression is of what a "nice" player he is. They don't mean nice as in skilled, but rather that he is polite and friendly at the tables. Honestly, I couldn't disagree more. Daniel is every bit as critical of players and their donkey moves as Hellmuth or Selbst, but Danny puts them down in such a passive-aggressive manner that they and those watching get fooled into thinking he's laughing *with* them instead of *at* them. The truth is, Daniel Negreanu is incredibly cool, funny, smart and generally a prince among players. But I would not use the word "nice" to describe him. He is a calculating, back-room pool hustler... a

tough-as-nails shark, smelling blood and pouncing on weakness the same as any of us.



At 12 players left, when three tables turned to two, Negreanu was moved to the seat on my right. We took turns stealing blinds, and each knocked out a player. Before long, the two of us were leading the tournament pack, first and second with around 400k chips each... massive 70 BB stacks. The third place stack was on the other table, a distant follower with only 300k. Most of the remaining field had less than half of what each of us were working with. Danny and I were neck and neck, with the chip lead switching back and forth between us.

The tournament director called a break and I went outside to regroup. A few minutes later, Dinsmore joined me. He told me about a conversation he had just witnessed in the Negreanu camp. He kept his voice low.

“Dutch! I just saw something you should hear over there with Negreanu. You know he’s been talking to Little Matt on his rail, who you know is from Missouri, right? Anyway, Little Matt just asked him if he was worried about your stack. Daniel looked at Little Matt and said, ‘Worried about Dutch? Just watch. He’ll be gone by next break. I’m going to *SPANK HIS ASS!*’”

Apparently, Daniel had made a big production out of this last line, actually pantomiming the action of putting an unruly child over his knee and delivering three hard whacks in time with each of the words. Spank. His. Ass.

“So, yeah Dutch... I don’t really know what the game plan should be, but you should know he’s coming after you. He’s going to go out of his way to try and stack you.”



When you see a pro whose game you respect sitting at your tournament table, it’s generally not a good thing. You’ll never see me happy when I have to

compete with masters of the game rather than an unknown hometown hero. But if a great player has respect for your game, it's not as bad as you might think.

Imagine a poker tournament with a thousand entrants. Suppose the stakes are big. The prize pool has a cool million. The stacks are deep and the structure is slow. Almost every single one of the entries are complete amateurs who can barely read the board. The only two players in this fantasy who have actually played poker happen to be Phil Hellmuth and Phil Ivey.

By some stroke of weird luck, both Phils get seated at the same starting table. Are either of them going to look at the other one and try to knock them out? It would hardly be a good strategy. In this scenario, they should both be shooting for first and second. The proper strategy would have to be one where they both have a *better* chance of getting first and second than if they weren't sitting next to each other.

I'm not suggesting the right strategy is to actively collude. But there is an *implicit* collusion which happens in tournaments. You see it all the time, where clumps of players make it through a massive field and end up at the final table together. They take turns, like vultures, eliminating the weak stacks and then picking on the new stacks. The best strategy dictates that you shouldn't go out of your way to eliminate a player who you think is the best opponent at your table.

Once again, there is a distinct line here between implicit collusion and active collusion. That line is as simple as a private conversation. The one is cheating, the other is proper tournament strategy. There is plenty of room at the top.

I remember Amir Vahedi telling me something over dinner. With a cigar in his mouth, he told me what he thought was the most important thing about winning at poker. "Always observe The Jungle Rule. You never see a gorilla eating a lion." Those two sentences are as good an introduction to game theory in poker as I've heard.

So KidPoker was coming after me. I was a little disappointed, really. We were so close to the final table, and I had envisioned us both making it through. I imagined the ESPN cameras at the final table filming us each win a quarter million and fighting headsup for the bracelet and the leftovers. Now I realized it probably wasn't going to happen. In Danny's world, I wasn't a lion. I wasn't a gorilla. I was the gazelle.

I prepared for the big hand. It finally came with 7♥7♠ on the button. Daniel had been playing his signature small-ball strategy, raising the minimum pre-flop almost every hand. I called on the button with the pocket pair. The flop came out: 7♣ 3♥ 2♠. I flopped top set... the stone cold nuts.

I realized Daniel must have started with a big hand when he continuation bet on the flop. He was generally betting half the pot or under it. But with this 7-high dry board, he pushed in around 2/3rds the pot. It was such a dry board that even with an over pair, I thought he would have to know I was crushing his range if I called or raised. Slow-playing a set is usually so transparent that you are almost always better off raising in a spot like I found myself in. It makes it *harder* to define your hand, not easier. And what's more, with the super deep stacks we had, raising is usually better because it inflates the pot, making the amounts you can get on the turn and river exponentially higher.

The more I thought about it, though, I realized Danny would probably assume I would raise with an overpair or a set because it's so obviously the right play. If I called, he could believe I was floating (i.e. calling with nothing in order to bluff on a later street). I did the best acting I could, trying to make it look like I was trying to act confident.

The turn came the 6♠.

Daniel checked timidly and I realized it was over. I had crushed the flop and he was going for the kill. For a second, I even believed myself that I was semi-bluffing with a Q♠J♠ instead of my top set. I fired out a 75k bet, almost the full pot. Daniel calculated, counted his stack (around 375k), then check-raised me to 100k more. I tanked.

Is 3.3 to 1 the right price for a flush draw with over cards? It's 15 outs if they are clean... that's 30%. If I'm up against an overpair, I'm still ok with 18%. There's another big river bet if I hit it. Gotta factor in those implied odds. God, this is so sick. Why didn't I just call and see the river? I always do this to myself. I think I'm getting the right odds here.

I called. The river came a harmless J♥. Danny slowly moved his stack in, feigning weakness. *Spank his ass.* He was all-in. The act was over.

“Call.”

The change in Negreanu's face was instant, turning immediately to surprise. Danny couldn't believe what just happened. Even looked at his stack like he wanted to pull the bet back. He knew his pair was no good.

“What do you have... jacks?!?” He said it like an accusation as he turned over his aces.

I turned over my set of sevens. It was the best hand I've ever played.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Negreanu got up from the table and stormed out of the Amazon room. Danny stormed right past his publicist and Little Matt without even a word. Dinsmore said he was nearly running out of the Rio into the valet parking lot, with Little Matt following him down the hallway and the camera crew right behind him. His good samaritan act would have to wait for television. They'd cover Little Matt during the Main Event broadcast, picking Negreanu's table as a feature.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

With Danny out of the way in 8th, we only had to lose one more before the final table was set. It didn't take long.

The ESPN coverage of our final table would focus on my headsup battle against Hachem. I gotta hand it to the champ. He was short stacked throughout most of the tournament, but he played with the patience of a Venus flytrap. All of

Day 2, Hachem kept getting it in good and doubling up, only to let himself drift downwards again to the bottom. He won a few hands in a row towards the end of the day, and when it was over, Hachem was heading into the final table third in chips. I was the chip leader, sitting on a monster stack of 900k... around 43% of the chips in play.

After bagging up my stack, I called my mom. She had been following the action online, sweating every hand the poker media reported. Mom wished me luck and told me she wished she could make it out to Vegas to watch the final table. But she had responsibilities back in Missouri... Austin was only five, and she couldn't leave him for the day. She told me she'd be watching online.

I returned to the Wild Wild West for a restless night's sleep. My mind rewinded to the near miss in 2004 against Cloutier, the blowup in 2003 to Moneymaker and Farha. Each time you get close, you wonder if it will be the last time. I was getting another shot at the elusive gold, and it felt like my tournament to lose. I'd already shown I could dust off a chip lead. I tossed and turned all night, battling thoughts of self-defeat.

After very little sleep, it was time to head back to the Rio. I showered, dressed, and looked in the mirror.

I was ready.

Then I threw up.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

When I arrived at the Rio, Lazar had been working on a patch deal. Stars and Full Tilt weren't interested, but Ultimate Bet was willing to pay me \$10k with a bonus \$40k if I was able to take down the bracelet while wearing their logo. I also negotiated a rail deal... they'd give me \$5k to divide up between anyone in the stands behind me wearing their t-shirt. All my friends were getting a payday.

I wanted to give UB the most I could for their money. That year, the site was passing out temporary tattoos in their courtesy suite. I took a page from David Leb's Golden Palace marketing playbook, who had made headlines putting temporary tattoos on the backs of boxers and MMA fighters. I grabbed one of the plastic ink transfers and applied it to the back of my hand where I figured on it being prominently displayed to the holecard camera. It worked well. The next year, Harrah's decided to ban temporary tattoos at televised tables... I like to think I was the reason for the new rule.

I was the last one to do the ESPN final table interview. As soon as we were finished, it was time to start. Cards were in the air. I walked onto the feature table stage with two dozen friends cheering my name on the rail. Bobby and the rest of The Crew, old friends like Darin Thomas, new friends like Bryan Devonshire and Melissa Poff. Even Jungblut was watching from a distance.

I smiled at all of them, then noticed an unexpected face. Right in front of my crowd, dressed in her best outfit, was my mom. She was beaming at me.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

We played for more than four hours. I didn't disappoint my family, my friends, or myself. I had kept up the pressure through the whole final table, chipping away the larger stacks and avoiding the short ones. There were plenty of plays that would be criticized. I made what plenty of spectators would call "bad folds" in order to avoid busting the short stacks.

There was a dramatic prize difference between 2nd and 6th and I wanted everyone shooting for the money jumps. The strategy was working. At four players, I had 1,500,000 in chips. It was more than 5x what Hachem had, sitting in second place with 290k. But Joe wouldn't just sit around waiting for the other two players to bust. Hachem didn't care about money jumps. He had won poker's biggest prize the year before... \$7.5 million dollars for his championship win.

He started making moves. First, he got it all-in against me with an A♥8♣ vs A♠5♣ on an A♣Q♣3♠ board. Then again with A♥Q♣ vs K♠Q♥ all-in preflop.

Suddenly my chip lead had evaporated. A break was called and I went back to my rail, a dozen poker players giving me advice to shake off the loss and focus.

Across the table, Hachem had his own supporters. His wife was in the crowd. Then there was Greg Raymer and a couple of the PokerStars marketing guys. I imagine Joe was hearing the same thing from his own corner as I was from mine. Repeated encouragement, “You’ve got this! You’ve got this!”

Two hours later, we were headsup. Just me and the champ. Hachem vs. Boyd. I had regained the chip lead... 1.7 million to his 300k.

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Against a 6-to-1 chip advantage, Joe never had much of a chance. I won the bracelet. When the final river card hit, a Five of Diamonds for the win, my rail surrounded me and lifted me up into the first WSOP crowd surf.

As part of our deal, the UB marketing team had asked me to run into their hospitality suite when the bracelet was won. They had hoped ESPN might do their after-interview in the suite, giving just a little more exposure to the brand. A few bottles of champagne were ready to go. The production team didn’t take the bait. They insisted I return to the final table and answer the questions Norman Chad asked, which I did. Then a few minutes with Nolan Dalla. And finally, a pose for everyone with a media pass who wanted to snap a shot.

As I held up my bracelet, I imagined everyone I had ever known in my life watching this moment. My old school principal, Mr. Brown. My old law school classmates. The regulars at the Wagon Wheel. Ron and the rest of the salesmen at Macy’s. Mario and the Montreal hackers. Tarter and the Antigua operators. Phil Laak and the Magician. Gianna and all the past flames. My grandmother. My father.

And then it was over. The cameras were gone.

I started walking towards the payout window when I heard my name. “Dutch!” I turned around and saw it was TJ Cloutier. He shook my hand warmly.

“Congratulations. I said you’d win plenty of ‘em.”

-- ♠♥♣♦ --



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Poker Tilt

“A work is never finished... just abandoned.”

Paul Valery

If you're looking for a Hollywood ending, this would be it. Our player wins the gold and lives happily ever after. But life doesn't play out like a movie, and it never ends on a high note. Winning the bracelet was the biggest high I've had. The feeling was better than any I've ever felt, before or since. Yet, it didn't really change much.

I'd tend to get more respect from other bracelet winners. Perhaps because there is a common experience, shared by the 700 or so players who have taken poker's top prize. Or maybe it's because bracelet winners have to respect my accomplishment lest they disrespect their own. I remember walking to the taxi line after cashing out (and immediately handing the bulk of the win over to the Sheets/Bax stable). Robert Williamson III shouted across the Rio hallway. "Congrats, Dutch! Welcome to the club!" He smiled and pointed to his own bracelet hanging around his wrist, won in 2002.

A few weeks later, after I'd whiffed every event I played on my own dime, I'd be in the VooDoo Lounge for an Ultimate Bet party. Hellmuth was there signing stuff... books, cards, whatever. I had snagged a Phil Hellmuth chip protector from one of the vendors in the Lifestyle Convention downstairs. I waited my turn, then asked for an autograph. "Hey Phil, you think you could sign this?" He turned to me with a smile. "Ha! You don't *have* to ask, Dutch!"

Besides the increased level of respect from other players, a bracelet also gives the career path an air of legitimacy to outsiders. Before, I remember telling people I was a professional poker player and getting a doubtful look, along with

a smug response like, “yeah, my cousin tried to count cards for awhile. He went broke.” After a bracelet, the doubtful looks stop.



You can't pay rent with street cred. It didn't take long before I was back to where I had started, grinding for bills and struggling to eat. By the end of the Series, I had watched my \$200k bankroll fall to under \$50k. I had walked from the backers and taken a shot in nearly every WSOP event on my own dime. And I had whiffed it, completely struck out. Not even a cash for the rest of the summer.

But I didn't care. I was still dancing on my post-bracelet cloud. Reality wouldn't set in until the end of the year. With the bankroll nearly gone, I was grossly overextending myself, taking a chance at the Bellagio Five Diamond tournament series. That's when the drugs and the stress took their toll. Smack during the main event, I went through another manic episode.

It was very public, thanks in no small part to the PokerWire video coverage. Amanda Leatherman had been doing the interviews, and I videobombed a few spots. I still cringe when watching the resulting footage, but it all made perfect sense at the time. A month later, when sanity finally returned, I'd beg Amanda to take them down. She refused, saying she had no control over PokerWire's YouTube channel. I asked her to move the request up the chain. *Sorry, Dutchy. There's nothing I can do.*

When I busted out of the WPT Main, it was obvious to everyone I was going through a breakdown. Johnny Monnette and Melissa Poff took it on themselves to play babysitter while Bobby and my mom drove down from Missouri to rescue me from mania. It must have been every bit as hellish as waiting in Tunica with Manic Rod.

Monnette and Poff would later tell me Johnny had been at the final two tables of the PokerStars Sunday Million tournament when the mania reached its height. Meanwhile, I was bouncing around his motel room, droning on about the CIA, the mob, and Steve Wynn. Monnette was dealt pocket aces on the

button when the chipleader raised. Before the action could reach him, I leapt across the room and shut the monitor on his laptop. He screamed out in frustration. I had put his computer into sleep mode, which took about thirty seconds to recover from. By the time he was back, his hand had timed out.

The next day, my mom and Bobby were there to pick me up and take me back to Missouri. They suffered through the long drive back to Missouri, where I'd spend another couple of weeks at the University Hospital.

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By Spring 2007, I was nearly broke again. I made a call to Sheets, who was willing to put me back in the stable. Once again I was playing for percentages of myself, splitting whatever expected value I had in a tournament with investors who had a better sense of money management than I did. I spent the first half of the year in a stony haze, waiting for the WSOP. The day before it started, I flew to Vegas and checked into a room at the Extended Stay across from the Rio. It was the same room I had gone crazy in just six months before.

The summer breezed by at breakneck speed. One of my buddies from Missouri, Ryan Tepen, had taken a job as a reporter at PokerNews. He'd come chill at my room at the end of every day and we'd talk about how the WSOP was going. I made two final tables: a third to Eli Elezra and a fifth to Bill Edler. I should have been thrilled... after make-up, I was back to over \$70k.

I wasn't thrilled, though. Winning my first bracelet a year before was like that first joint on the Vegas Strip. I had created a watermark, and was chasing a repeat of the rush which had been unmatched. Compared to the first bracelet win, everything else felt empty. I was growing more and more depressed and fatter by the day.

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Poker seemed to be dying. In September 2006, Congress had pushed through the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act (UIGEA). The legislation had been tacked onto the Safe Ports Act at the last minute, making it illegal for

banks to process transactions for online poker sites. It was signed into law by President Bush on October 13th, which was an unlucky Friday. The heads of Party Poker responded by leaving the US, creating a vacuum which PokerStars and Full Tilt were all too eager to fill. By the next year's WSOP, the number of entrants to the Main Event would drop from 8,773 to 6,358. It was just the second time the Big Dance had seen a dip in runners, the first time happening more than two decades before.

This drop has continued, for the most part. Black Friday would make the downswing more pronounced, with PokerStars and Full Tilt forced out of the US market. We haven't seen an uptick in the WSOP championship entrants since 2010.

Last year in 2013, I'd compete against 6,352 players... the lowest since Hachem's win in 2005. It's still a huge increase from the Moneymaker era, and drastically blows away the low triple-digit fields from the classic days which crowned Hellmuth, Seed, Nguyen, Chan and Ungar.

Even so, there is a general feeling from most of the pros today that the glory days are behind us. Like disco or backgammon, our niche world is dying. The best has come and gone, so quickly we didn't even see it.

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At the beginning of 2008, I made a POY prop bet with Brandon Cantu and Jeff Madsen. Both players had taken down a bracelet the same year as I had. Like most years before, I started the race in Tunica. I'd be joined by Ryan Tepen. He had made the move from poker media to poker player, and the two of us drove down together from Missouri and shared a room at the Grand.

During one of the bigger WSOP Circuit events, I'd watch a guy's heart stop at the table. He is was in the seat to the left of the dealer, just two tables away from me. I was sitting in the five seat, and had a straight shot look at the old man. He looked like Santa Claus. He had been holding AKo, waiting to raise preflop, when his heart gave out. He slouched in his seat with his eyes closed.

When it came to his turn to act, the dealer gave him a nudge and then realized something was wrong. He called for a floor.

The tournament erupted into a commotion, as players realized it was a medical emergency and called for a doctor. I remember watching Brett Jungblut run through the tournament area to try and help the fallen player. Brett was the first one there, and helped lift the unconscious man off of his seat and to the ground. Jungblut wore a helpless expression as he cradled the dying man's head in his arms. We made eye contact, and Brett shook his head with a grimace.

Within thirty seconds, one of the players had answered the call. "I'm a doctor. Let me through." The tournament clock stopped as the doctor administered CPR. Ten minutes later, the man was being carried off the tournament floor by EMTs. His heart had started beating again and he was breathing on his own. The tournament players clapped in a show of encouragement.

The tournament started again. The poker world went on. I'd ask one of the floor men what happened to the man. He had died later that night in the hospital. He hadn't regained consciousness. The last think he had experienced in this life was holding a suited Ace-King in a WSOP Circuit event in Tunica, Mississippi.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Brett and I made up shortly after we saw the man die. Life's too short.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

In April of 2008, I was the fattest I'd ever been. Brandon Cantu made a comment about it during a pizza party at his house one day.

"How much do you suppose you're at right now?"

"I'd guess 225."

"Oh, I'll take the over on that. Twenty bucks says you're over 230 lb."

“Book it.”

We headed up to his bathroom scale, and I stepped on the glass platform. I weighed in at 239 pounds. Christ, I had turned into a lard ass. I waved it off... weight is easy to lose, I told him. I could get back into shape in no time.

Of course you see where this is going. Poker players don't argue in absolute terms. They only see percentages. What are the chances, what are the odds? If a gambler makes a statement about the world, he either puts up money or he concedes the point. They are certain of nothing, but confident in their every assertion. I love this about poker players.

Cantu and I disagreed about how likely it was I would lose weight. He offered a prop bet. His \$10k to mine that I wouldn't get down to 180 pounds by the WSOP Main Event. It was about 75 days away. I'd have to lose close to 60 pounds.

I accepted the bet. For the next two months, all I ate was seaweed and salmon. I cut out all the carbs, stopped drinking soda, and ran five miles a day. It was horrible, but the pounds shed quickly.

I was down to about 210 lb. when I remember joining Cantu, Rick Fuller, Jeff Madsen, and Lacey Jones for a hookah at Paymons. Fuller was drunk, and commented on the weight loss.

“You look like you've lost some weight, Dutch. Looking better. You were looking fat... fat Dutch... fatty, fatty, fat fat fat!”

“Yeah, thanks bud. Cantu and I have a prop bet. Dropping down to 180 by the series.”

“How much are you at now?” I told him... 210. “No way you're going to do that. Let me in on half of that, Brandon!”

Brandon booked it. And I just smirked...

“Of course I’m going to do it. It’s only going to take staying off carbs and putting in another 50 hours at the gym. You know what I think about when I’m on the treadmill, Rick? *A hundred dollars an hour.* That’s what I’m getting paid by you and Brandon to run.”

Cantu looked irritated. Nobody said anything, until Lacey broke the silence.

“I wish someone would pay *me* a hundred dollars an hour to workout.”

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

And so, when the WSOP rolled around in 2008, I was the thinnest I’d been since college. I was also dizzy most of the time, my brain completely starved of fat. At 185 lb. and two weeks before the Main Event, I offered Cantu a buyout and he accepted. I’m sure Cantu wouldn’t have welched, but I’ve found offering a buyout is a great way to ensure getting paid on a prop bet.

About a week into the Series, I met Michele. It’s funny, because for all the money I’ve dumped on lap dances and all the times I’ve tried to pickup a dancer out of a strip club, it was outside of the Starbucks in the Rio hallway that it would finally happen. She was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. Her elbows were the perfect amount of pointy. Michele was leaving the hotel pool and had stopped for a coffee. I asked if I could buy her a drink, and she said yes. We never stopped talking.

Later that night, we were having sushi at an all-night place off of Tropicana. I had tried to impress Michele by letting her wear my WSOP bracelet. Then I had a little too much to drink and forgot all about my bracelet when we said our goodbyes. I watched her drive away in a taxi. She was halfway down the street when it dawned on me that my bracelet was gone, maybe forever. The taxi screeched to a halt, and did a U-turn on Hacienda. Michele came back and rolled down the window, laughing at me as she gave back the trophy.

I have to thank Brandon for making the prop bet with me. If I hadn’t ditched the sixty pounds, I doubt Michele would have given me a second look. We’re going on six years now.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Life Lesson #38**The best place to pickup a stripper is at a Starbucks.**

— ♠♥♣♦ —

I remember something Chip Jett quipped to me back in 2002. We were at the final table of a Hustler main event satellite. I had just found out he was married to Karina, who was easily the hottest girl I'd seen in the poker world at the time. I had played with her a few days before in the Stud Hi-Low tournament Huck Seed had won. She played well.

I complimented him, saying something along the lines of, "Karina's your wife? Congratulations, man... she's super hot." I meant it in the sincerest way possible.

He let out a deep sigh and snickered.

"Take her."

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Two weeks after Michele and I met in the Rio hallway, I started slipping into mania again. Right before the Main Event was about to start, I found myself in four-point restraints in a Vegas emergency room, coming down from drug-fueled delusions. I missed the championship event that year... the only time since 2003. I expected her to be gone, but Michele stayed with me for two days. When it was over, she said things were going to change or she was going to leave.

It wasn't until a few years with Michele that I really understood what Chip had been saying. I don't expect sympathy, but it's a tough road being in love with a beautiful woman. Michele reigned me in with ultimatums. I'd stay off the drugs. Quit smoking, eat better, live healthier. I'd stop blowing money on stupid shit, stop blowing time on things that didn't move our team forward.

I lost my freedom. A world of possibilities collapsed into responsibilities. I'd distance myself from friends who I saw as bad influences, and try to be the best influence I could be to the friends that remained. I'm a better person for it.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Whatever the cause, I haven't seen a return of my bipolar disorder since the summer Michele and I started dating. Maybe it's just a matter of growing up and becoming more stable with age. I don't go days without sleep anymore. I don't go on drug binges with strangers I just met. I've been drug-free, prescription and street, for several years now.

I always carry with me the small fear that my bipolar disorder will rear its ugly head. Every so often, I'll feel the magical thinking start to emerge. I'll have a little trouble sleeping and have to force myself to slow down. I used to chase those manic highs, as if life wasn't full unless I was living a Hunter S. Thompson story. Now I avoid them. Life is fuller stable, better sane.

Maybe it was always just the drugs.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

In 2010, I'd win my second bracelet. It was another Six-Handed event, this time Limit Hold'em. The final table was tough, ending with a headsup match between me and Brian Meinders, an online pro who would go on to win his first bracelet two years later after going headsup with Darin.

Brian had the chip lead when we got headsup, but he also had a hell of a poker tell. Like many online players, he was impatient. He didn't see a reason for waiting until it was his turn to look at his cards, and he'd release them differently based on what they were. I didn't even have to look at him... just listen. A snap against the felt meant a strong hand, silence meant a weak one. Sometimes it really is that simple.

I have no doubt in the world Brian's technical game was stronger than mine. We could have played the same scenario online a dozen times, and he might

have won all twelve. But around the felt, sitting face to face and armed with a pre-flop strength tell, Meinders didn't have a chance.

When it was over, I had accomplished something only 140 players have pulled off. I was a multiple bracelet winner. Both bracelets were won in the post-Moneymaker era, and both were won in Vegas. This boosts the accomplishment even higher.

I had played for several years waiting for a return to that epic emotional height from 2006. It didn't come. The second bracelet felt empty by comparison. It was like the second joint, the second line of cocaine, the second cigarette. It still felt good... but not even close to the first. There wouldn't be the table at Tao or the after-party at Rhino. Instead, I'd hand off the lion's share to the backers again and head home to the apartment I shared with Michele to rest up for the next day's tournament.

Poker is a drug. Once you taste the ultimate highs our game has to offer, it will never quite satisfy the same way again. Yet I keep coming back every year, chasing the dream again and again.



On April 15, 2011, the Department of Justice seized the domain names of PokerStars, Full Tilt Poker, and Ultimate Bet. It was called Black Friday in the poker world.

I was playing a WSOP Circuit event at Caesars Palace when I heard the news, which spread like wildfire through the tournament area. I immediately took a break to call Michele and tell her to login to our online accounts and request a cashout. It was too late. The US government had spoken. Online poker had gotten too big, too many hundreds of millions of dollars in rake were funneled to overseas operators. When the cover was pulled back on America's favorites sites, we saw an ugly picture.

All three had been engaged in bank fraud, tagging online deposits as retail purchases. Worst was Full Tilt, who had somehow found themselves in a nine

figure hole. After paying the founders and shareholders tens of millions of dollars each, they were left owing players more than \$300 million they didn't have.



A few years before Black Friday, but after the UIGEA, I was playing in a WSOP preliminary with both Ferguson and Lederer seated at my table. They were in the one and the three seat, respectively. Ferguson was mostly quiet, focusing on the action and trying to bring his A-game to the table. Lederer, on the other hand, was chatting it up. This is the difference between five bracelets and two.

In the mostly one-sided conversation, Lederer droned on about the current attempts at legislation and FTP's joint efforts with the Poker Players Alliance. Ferguson kept his poker face until Lederer said something he disagreed with.

"I just can't wait until the US finally makes it legal on a federal level to play online poker, and we're able to get out of this legal grey area we find ourselves in."

Ferguson responded, "Not me. Once that happens, we'll have to start competing with the likes of Harrah's and Wynn. They have so much money to throw at it that they'll bury us. I'm happy with the way things are. I say keep it grey as long as possible."

I quietly listened to the exchange. I'd already come to my own conclusion that there was nothing legally grey about online poker. Evidently, the Southern District of New York would agree with me.



PokerStars was able to pay off their outstanding deposits in a matter of weeks. For the most part, the organization escaped criticism from the poker community. Full Tilt and UB were another story. For months, the founders and directors of FTP kept quiet. Finally, Lederer broke his silence in an interview with PokerNews they called "The Lederer Files". In it, he explains they had

issues with processors which is what led to their \$300 million black hole. He admits they didn't see a problem with accepting new deposits from non-US players, even with the huge deficit on their books. The site had tried to rake their way out of the problem, the same as we had at Pokerspot. What was the difference?

Well for one, Bobby and I were teenagers and the Full Tilt group were experienced titans of industry. For another, Lederer and Ferguson each received more than \$40 million in dividends. So did Ray Bitar, the company frontman. Ivey, Juanda, Furst, and all of the other founding Red Pros each received millions in distributions.

Two years after Black Friday, Bitar reached a plea deal with the DOJ where he was ordered to forfeit \$40 million in assets. He was sentenced to time served, which had been a week in jail. At least three other individuals received prison sentences... Buckley, one of the founders of Absolute Poker, received 14 months. Ira Rubin, who was in charge of one of the payment processors, was handed three years. John Campos, the co-owner of SunTrust, the Utah bank assisting in the mislabeling, was handed three months.

Lederer and Ferguson each had a plea which saw them forfeit approximately \$2.5 million dollars worth of assets to the Southern District of New York. The poker world remains angry at the pair. They've mostly forgiven the other Red Pro founders, rallying behind the likes of Phil Ivey, who according to his divorce proceedings, had been pulling out just shy of a million dollars a month from Full Tilt Poker dividends.

When Black Friday hit, I lost an affiliate account which was paying my rent every month. PokerStars assumed the Full Tilt brand and player base in return for a few hundred million, earmarked to pay back the FTP obligation. As part of the PokerStars deal, they were able to assume the FTP affiliate players without having to pay the promised lifetime residuals to affiliates. A lot of people, myself included, still ended up getting screwed by the whole mess even after players were paid back.

Supposedly, Lederer and Ferguson are going to brave the poker community and make a return to the tables for the upcoming 2014 WSOP. And why wouldn't they? I, for one, will welcome them back. Poker hasn't been the same without Jesus and The Professor.

As for the haters? Well, one of the great thing about poker is the haters don't matter. The cards don't care what you've done in the past, or what a forum troll might think about you on a personal level. All that matters at the table is how you play, what risks you take, what the river card brings.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

In 2007, during my next-to-last mental hospital stay, Bobby and I decided to open-source all the old Pokerspot software. It was our last official effort to try and make amends to the poker community for the mistakes of our past. The software still sits on the Google Code servers:

<https://code.google.com/p/pokerspot/source/checkout>

Take it.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

Up until I met Michele, I had still been trying to personally pay off Pokerspot players. Even though our records were gone, I still remembered a number of specific cases. I guess I've come out of pocket about \$15,000. I realize it's a pittance compared to what was lost.

After taking down my second bracelet, one of our biggest winners on Pokerspot emailed me. It was John Buchanan, half of the husband and wife team behind MsSunshine. The couple had taken more than \$50,000 out of our old \$20/40 Limit Hold'em game. They were a force to be reckoned with. Back in 2004, I had seen Leslie Buchanan at Binion's. She was working the tournament floor as a satellite director. When I finished 2nd in Razz, I bought her a drink at the Horseshoe bar and apologized for the Pokerspot debacle. I gave her a grand in chips, telling her I knew it wasn't even close to what she was owed, but at least it was something.

Fast forward to 2010, and John came along with an email a week after the end of the WSOP. It sounded like he was in dire straits. He offered to forgive and forget the Pokerspot debt for 50% of what was owed: \$25,000.

After that series, even with the bracelet win, I was only left with \$30k. So it goes with makeup and losses. But I wanted to do something. I had started drafting an email with an offer when Michele started in on me. She had been reading over my shoulder.

“You can’t keep carrying it with you, Russ. You didn’t mean to do it. You didn’t benefit from it. You can’t expect anyone else to forgive and forget if you don’t even forgive yourself.”

The words hit home. It wasn’t my decision anymore. Every dollar I might have given away was a dollar taken away from our future. I emailed John back and told him I had left Pokerspot behind me. I wasn’t holding out hope of ever making it right. Some things can’t ever be fixed.

A while later, I got an email from Leslie, the other half of MsSunshine. She told me she had forgiven me for the Pokerspot mistakes. She said everybody messes up when they’re young, and there were plenty of things she had done as a teenager that she was glad people had let her forget. She hoped I would let Pokerspot go and try to learn from it.

Her email meant so much. I’m still sorry for the past, and I’ll always wear the scars. But I stopped carrying the weight.

CONCLUSION

“It’s not a case of: ‘Read this book and then you’ll think differently. I’ve written this book, and I don’t think differently.’”

Daniel Kahneman

We’re at a stage in the poker story where individual states are legalizing, hoping to build a US-facing industry with interstate pacts and perhaps even international player exchanges. So far, we’ve seen Nevada, Delaware, and New Jersey all legalize online poker within their own state. But with the player pools drawing from a population of millions, as opposed to hundreds of millions, the resulting action is just plain depressing. The weekend tournaments are a shadow of what used to be.

For the years following Black Friday, I’ve watched as the best poker players have been forced out of the country, or else out of poker entirely. They flee to Mexico, to Canada, to Europe. This game of poker is American made, yet it couldn’t be clearer that our country would like to see it leave. We can’t legally play Texas Hold’em in Texas. We can’t play Omaha Hi-Low in Nebraska. We’ve turned our champions into refugees.

-- ♠♥♣♦ --

In 2006, I gave an interview to PokerListings after winning the match against Hachem. The interviewer asked me, “What does winning a bracelet mean to you?” I responded with what I thought was a funny quip.

“To me, a bracelet means security... because now, if I ever go broke, I can always write a book.”

This is that book. Since Black Friday, I’ve watched my own bankroll shrink month after month. I long for the glory days of poker’s past, when the pros

could stay in Vegas and the action would come to us. Perhaps I'll leave, head down south with Tepen and the other pros in Rosarito Beach. But I don't want to leave.

At the beginning of 2013, I sold one of my poker trophies on eBay to make rent. It was a Bellagio bracelet I won during a Five Diamonds prelim. It gave me some leeway. I wasn't on the street. Two weeks later, another Bellagio bracelet from the same year appeared on the auction site.

The right move would seem to be to move on. Leave poker behind, get a real job. The world is so much bigger than poker. I've tried to make a clean break, even sent out a few dozen resumes looking for jobs. The employment history usually scares off employers. 2001 – Present. Professional gambler.

Then right around the corner is always another tournament, another chance to turn things around. Last year, I'd make it through to the money in the Main Event. It was my third time cashing in the Big Dance. Sometime late on Day Four, the room erupted in applause. Everybody stood as Jack Effel, the WSOP tournament director, announced that Doyle Brunson had just been eliminated. I stood up and clapped as hard as anybody out of respect for the living legend.

Then I returned to my seat to focus on the next hand.



There isn't a career where a person's life is more obviously tied to chance than that of a poker player's. Yet regardless of what we do, we all drift in the same sea of probability. We hold to the idea that we are in control of our destiny, that we are the ones in charge of our journey. But the reality is we are all slaves to the deck. The fact we are even here at all is a fluke of epic proportions.

And one day we won't be here. Everything ends eventually. Our game is no exception. There will be a last bad beat, a last check-raise. There will be a last shuffle and a last hand dealt. There will be a last World Series of Poker.

What will people say when it's gone? Will they say to their friends, their children, their grandchildren:

"I was there. I saw the legends of the game, battled for glory on the felt right beside them. I played during the time of Doyle Brunson and Amarillo Slim. I played during the time of Johnny Chan, Phil Hellmuth, and Ivey. I played during the days of Daniel Negreanu, Layne Flack, and Antonio.

"I was there, I tell you! I was there during the golden age of poker! I played during the time of Moneymaker and Gold. I played with Joe Hachem, with Chino Rheem, with the Mizrachi brothers, the Binger brothers, the Hinkle brothers, with David Williams and Danny Alaei.

"I played during the time of Brandon Cantu and Jeff Madsen, the time of Mike Matusow and Gavin Smith.

"I played during the time of Dutch Boyd and The Crew."

AN ALTERNATE ENDING

Fuck.

I can't believe he called. I sheepishly turn over my cards. King-high. Chris turns over his own hand. It's a pair of threes. Pocket-freaking-threes for his whole tournament life! I guess it was a good call, but hell. Even when he's right, I could be bluffing with better than what he has just turned over.

I feel sick to my stomach as our tournament director, Matt Savage, announces the all-in hands.

“The flop is 9-4-2 rainbow. Dutch Boyd is all-in with a King and a Queen. Chris is in the lead with pocket threes.”

I'm in bad shape. The ESPN camera man focuses on the flop. Everything had been lining up, and now four days of hard poker looks like it's coming to an end. On the rail, I see Joey and Brett. They look just as disgusted as I feel. They shout in encouragement. “Come on! Let's see some paint!”

I hold my breath as the next card is dealt. The dealer takes his time, letting the camera and the audience soak up the tension. Savage continues to report the hand history on his microphone.

“The turn is a five. No help to Dutch. He'll need a King or a Queen or else Chris Moneymaker will double up and take the chip lead.”

The boom mic hangs above us. The cameras focus for the final card. I close my eyes and listen. Ages seem to pass. Then the crowd gasps. I hear Brett let out a cheer, as Matt Savage confirms what I'm hearing.

“It's a KING! Chris Moneymaker has just been eliminated from the tournament.”

I open my eyes to see Chris shaking his head. I feel sorry for him for a few seconds. He had made an incredibly ballsy call, only to be rewarded with a dirty exit. He heads out the double doors of Binion's Bullpen, followed by the ESPN cameras. The dealer scoots the massive pot towards me, and I quickly stack the chips.

Better you than me, buddy. I forget about Moneymaker as soon as the next cards are dealt. Just another casualty. I've taken worse and given worse. I focus on the present hand. It's still a tough climb to the championship. I'll have to get through Ivey and Harrington, through Vahedi and Farha.

But something tells me things are going to go my way. It feels like my tournament to win. It feels like by the end of tomorrow, it will be my picture and my name downstairs on the wall.

And after that? Who knows.

AFTERWORD

Last but not least... as part of our Kickstarter campaign, I promised to reveal the poker tell which I had traded to Brandon Cantu several years ago. It was the tell we had talked about in our fundraising video, the one Brandon had texted about when he said he hoped I never shared it with anyone. Sorry Cantu. Here it goes. **The tell is when a player announces the size of his bet or raise to the dealer.**

Now generally speaking, any clarification question is a sign of strength. When a player asks the dealer such things as “How much to me?” or “Is the action on me?”, these are generally signs of strength. They are what I call *clarification questions*, and can perhaps be linked back to Caro’s maxim of “acting weak means strong.”

But when a player is raising pre-flop or betting on a flop, and he makes it a point to make eye contact with the dealer and state the specific amount of his bet or raise... well, this is generally a sign of weakness. He’s usually bluffing. It’s a different type of clarification, what I think of as a *clarification statement*. And it generally means the opposite of a clarification question.

Like any tell, you need to be weary before risking your whole stack on this one. It’s best to validate it first by seeing a player show a corresponding hand, or at least fold to a re-raise. Also, keep in mind this tell isn’t reliable unless the amount he is verbally stating *doesn’t need to be stated*. If he’s throwing in an oversize chip, for example, and verbally stating a lower amount... well, you can’t assume anything. It’s only when the amount he puts in the middle speaks for itself, yet he adds the specific verbal declaration and directs the statement to the dealer, that this tell comes into play.

So now that it’s in the wild, should we be worried about players throwing reverse tells? Maybe... but I’d suggest to you that it’s always best to follow the advice of Navarro and Hellmuth: conceal don’t reveal. If a player is savvy enough to fall for a reverse tell, then there are probably easier spots to attack at the table. Always follow The Jungle Rule. Be a lion, respect the gorillas, eat the gazelles.

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