

Spring 5-2013

## I Believe in My System

Guy Choate  
*University of New Orleans, gchoate17@hotmail.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Choate, Guy, "I Believe in My System" (2013). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1620.  
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1620>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

I Believe in My System

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Nonfiction Writing

by

Guy Choate

B.A. University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2006

May 2013

*For Todd Wiley, and the rest of us—  
may the dealer always be holding the pai gow.*

## Acknowledgments

I hadn't planned on going back to school to write about gambling, but that's what happened, and looking back, I guess I should've known. First and foremost, thank you to my mom and dad, whom I have tested in every way I know how, yet they have supported me every step of the way. Mom, my fingers aren't broken yet. Dad, when you came home to find me playing online poker, the best way you could have handled that was by saying, "Son, I'm going to spare you the speech on what I think about this, but I hope you know what you're doing." Well done. Thanks to my sister, Laura, who was always a hard act to follow. I learned early on that to get any piece of her spotlight, I'd have to go big at it. Thanks to Penny, who ain't my real mama and needs to shut up, but who has probably talked my dad down on my behalf—"Good *grief*."—at least a few times.

I'm forever thankful to the UNO CWW, students and faculty alike. Especially my friend and mentor, Richard Goodman, who provided writerly enthusiasm and inspiration at just the right time. I'm forever grateful. Also Randy Bates, who taught me to look at the words and sentences, not just the paragraphs. Amanda and Joseph Boyden, your generosity—whether opening up your home or donating five bucks for me to submit to a contest—went a long way and will never be forgotten. Thanks to Jed Horne and Neal Walsh—separately—it thrilled me to no end when you told someone you didn't know what the hell he had tried to do on the page, even when it was me. To Dr. Doreen Piano, thank you for tolerating my attempt at academic writing, and also for coming on over to the fun side of words to be on my thesis committee. To Rick Barton, thanks for keeping it all together. All of my classmates, I think I learned something from each of you. Laura McKnight, Kaia and I thank you for sharing space with us, we certainly had a good time. Jonathan Brown, you made me want to get better at everything. Thank you to the Gold Room family, and anyone who seemed to be generally okay with letting me drink a lot while holding a microphone. Thanks to Shelley Brown, lover of the program. Shut it down.

Thank you to Harrah's New Orleans and all my gambling friends. Most especially Wig, Chlope, Bone and Bear. Also to my pai gow buddy John, and all my Vietnamese friends at the baccarat table, whom I never properly introduced myself to. Thanks to Richie and Mindy of the NOLA Social Ride. Thanks to the UNO cafeteria and their all-you-care-to-eat buffet. Thanks to my NOLA neighbors at 928 Conti St., with the exception of Karen. Thanks to Tom Seidita and the Atlee Branch Public Library, who both put a roof over my head while I wrote a significant portion of this thesis.

Thank you to my dog, Kaia, who could've been going for a walk the whole time I was sitting at my computer, writing this damned thesis, if that's even what I was doing. Probably playing online poker. Could've at least gone to the park or something this morning. Thank you for your patience with me, dear friend. Don't for one second think I haven't noticed.

And finally, thank you to my person, Elizabeth Seidita. You give me the encouragement and confidence I need to handle all of this. You deserve an MFA as much as I do. Your critiques of my work are spot on and I cringe to think of what I would've taken to class with me had you not been there to tell me that what I wrote might be a little too cheesy, or might not have enough Celine Dion in it. Thank you for giving up your time in Richmond to be with me in New Orleans. I'm going to do my best to make sure you know how good of a decision you made.

*"And I believed in my system ... within a quarter of an hour I won 600 francs. This whetted my appetite. Suddenly I started to lose, couldn't control myself and lost everything. After that I ... took my last money, and went to play ..."*

- From Fyodor Dostoyevsky's letters to his brother Mikhail.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Rent .....	1
Chapter 2: Where In the World is Carmen Sandiego's Coffee? .....	5
Chapter 3: Powering the Machine.....	15
Chapter 4: The Moneymaker Effect.....	19
Chapter 5: My First Withdrawal .....	24
Chapter 6: The Road to Tunica .....	28
Chapter 7: The Rules of Poker.....	36
Chapter 8: Chip and a Chair (Well Played).....	42
Chapter 9: Back to Tunica.....	52
Chapter 10: A Strategy Revised .....	58
Chapter 11: Sins Forgiven.....	63
Chapter 12: Someone Else's Money .....	69
Chapter 13: My Favorite Neighbor.....	80
Chapter 14: Pai Gow John .....	86
Chapter 15: A Common Problem.....	95
Chapter 16: Getting It Back .....	101
Bibliography .....	107
Vita.....	108

## Chapter 1

### Rent

They send me \$10 in the mail once a week to come see them, but I usually go more than that because it's only half a mile from my front door to theirs. Sometimes I think about not going to visit them for a few months and I wonder if that happens, will they start sending me \$20 every week to entice me back? On the short bicycle ride over, I realize I'll probably never know because I can't stay away that long. I would show up even if they didn't give me money, but it's not like I can afford to refuse it.

"Now, I'm sorry folks, but you've got to be 21 to get in," the man at the door in the black jacket says. He's talking to a couple who appear to be in their early 40s, but he checks the woman's driver's license anyway and they laugh at the joke I've heard him deliver probably a hundred times. While he's running the license through his scanner, he glances up to see me and he nods for me to walk around them. Not because I look old—I'm 30—but because he knows me. He used to ID me and upon seeing my Arkansas driver's license would say, "Welcome to New Orleans." He kept that up for a while. Months, even. Now I just get that nod and I wonder if he thinks I'm on some perpetual holiday here. That's what I feel like I'm doing every time I walk through these huge glass doors and into the frosty air. It's the same air I breathed in Shreveport, Louisiana the first time I ever set foot in a major casino, the same air that rolls through the casino in Aruba I found after becoming bored at the beach, and it's the same comforting air that I found in Las Vegas during a bachelor party trip with friends. And I *was* on holiday those times, but not

today. This is a random Wednesday night in March. I have homework to do. I'm trying to write an essay about all-you-can-eat buffets, but any time I start writing about the buffet at the casino, I get distracted by the thought of sitting at the table and maybe accumulating wealth.

And so here I am, walking straight to the Pai Gow table and grabbing the only open seat, in between a drunk nursing his Miller Lite and an old Asian man muttering something in another tongue and I notice his pronounced underbite and how thin the layer of skin is that covers the bones of his face. Almost everyone at the table is smoking unapologetically, despite our close proximity to each other. I pull the three one hundred dollar bills and my player's card—that small credit card-sized evidence of my loyalty—from my pocket and place them on the green felt in front of me.

"Changing three hundred with a Platinum card!" The dealer shouts over her shoulder to a man named Borris, according to his rectangular nametag, but who looks more undeserving of a name like Borris than anyone I have ever seen. Someone named Borris belongs in a James Bond movie, an early one, but this guy looks like he just walked off the set of *Sling Blade*. His patchy mustache trimmed in the same way it's probably been since high school, his dark suit a size too large for his scrawny frame. He walks over to the table and reads my name off the card.

"How we doing today, Mr. Guy?" he says, not wanting to risk screwing up my last name, as he slides my card into his computer. Checking into the computer is sort of like punching a time card at the factory, but it's a little more complicated than that. The computer uses a formula to calculate points for each player at the table based on game, average wager and duration of play. Once a player accumulates enough points in a calendar year, he moves from a Gold Card to a Platinum or possibly a Diamond, or the real high rollers get a Seven Stars Card. The benefits of

obtaining these higher level reward cards range from skipping to the front of the line at the cashier's window to daily limo service for your morning coffee run.

But trying to upgrade my status is a secondary goal today. I'm here to make the rent. I need another \$35 to put a roof over my unemployed head for another month, or else I have to get a job. It's hard working for an hourly \$10 wage when I know how easy it is to make \$10 in two seconds at the casino while a woman in a push-up bra brings me complimentary Grey Goose martinis. This is not work, but it can have the same payoff if I maintain my discipline.

My strategy is simple and it's been used for centuries. I like it, and it works for me enough that I haven't chosen to abandon it yet for any extended period of time. It's called the Martingale and it was designed for coin-flip games like Pai Gow Poker. The game has its nuanced rules, but in the end, a player is basically flipping a coin against the dealer. If the "coin" comes up heads, the player wins the amount wagered. If the coin comes up tails, the dealer wins. Using the Martingale, any time the dealer wins, the player should double the amount of the next bet. Eventually the coin will come up heads again and that one win will offset all the previous wagers lost, plus win the amount of the original bet. The only catch is that you have to have enough money to double the wager every time or the system breaks down.

Sitting here, now, between the Asian guy and the drunk, who tells me he's 50 years old and that someone should write a book about him, because he has stories, I think about that time I lost the coin-flip 21 times in a row. I think about it a lot, actually. I think about it as much as I think about sex, and kind of in the same way—it comes in flashes that I don't comprehend until it's already passed. My bet started at \$10 and now I'm flipping a coin with the dealer for \$40. I just need one more win before I've made my \$35 I came for, but I'm having a good time listening to the drunk sing me the songs he's written, which sound eerily like Jimmy Buffett b-sides. I

think about hanging around and seeing if I can't make a little more. The drunk asks me where I'm living and I tell him about my apartment down the street. Then he tells me he's crashing at his mom's for a while until he can sell his songs. I win the \$40 hand and decide maybe I should walk away, after all, happy to pay rent.

## Chapter 2

### Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego's Coffee?

In the small town of Beebe, Arkansas, where I grew up, the majority of nine-year-old boys who bond with their fathers do so in the woods while they hunt whatever animal is unlucky enough to be in season. My dad didn't hunt, though, and I had no desire to. Instead, Dad thought he could teach me about point spreads and we could bond by wagering against each other on football games. Nothing crazy—a nickel on the Giants, a dime on the Packers. Just enough to give us a reason to watch. We didn't have cable, so we only got to watch three, maybe four games on any given Sunday if we channel-jumped. Dad liked rooting for the New Orleans Saints, but I never really knew why. Based on distance to stadium, we should've both been Cowboys fans, but still, we were a good five hours from Dallas. I liked cheering for the Kansas City Chiefs mostly because I thought red and gold were respectable team colors. If I didn't think the Chiefs had a shot in covering the spread, though, I'd turn on them in a heartbeat. If a team like the Steelers played a team like the Patriots, neither of us cared who won, which is why we put a nickel on it, to have some temporary personal investment where there was ordinarily none.

Beebe doesn't have a lot going on, socially speaking. The town sits in a dry county, meaning that, at the time, the strongest thing a person could buy himself to drink within a 30-mile radius was the sweet tea at the Sweden Creme. Instead of going to bars, people nearly sold out the bleachers at Beebe Badger football and basketball games, but the true social hubs of the community were the churches. The town boasted less than 5,000 people, but we had more than

our fair share of churches. I'm not even sure exactly how many there were, but I'd ballpark it at a good dozen. Everyone I knew either went to the First Baptist Church over on College Street, the Union Valley Baptist Church out on Highway 64, the First Assembly of God on Fir Street, the Church of Christ on Center Street, or down the street from my house on Main Street people went to the First Church of the Nazarene next door to my church, the First United Methodist. There were other churches, but the other ones were the churches that had their own schools attached to them, which I recognized as being weird, even as a kid. Church was the place I went to get away from the people at school, and school was the place I went to get away from the people at church. Mixing the two just didn't seem right. Even now, I don't much understand why everyone didn't grow up a Methodist who went to public school.

We always went to church. And I nearly always hated it. On Sunday mornings, I was the last one in the house to get out of bed, which irritated the shit out of my sister Laura, two years older than me. By the time I walked out of my room and peeled my second eyelid open, she had unplugged the last of her beauty appliances and administered her perfume. Even now, 20 years later, when I'm late for an appointment, the sound of her shoe heels on hardwood floors echo in my head. Laura is angry because I have made her late for church and thus thwarted her chance at maximum popularity. Except no, she was still going to be the Youth Group president or vice president or whatever she was, no matter how late I made her. With any luck, I ran late enough that Mom and Laura had to go on without me and I could either ride with Dad or just walk. It wasn't far. Dad liked walking, and I liked walking with Dad. More than anything, though, I liked laying the sports page down on the brown den carpet and eying the NFL matchups for the week. The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* dedicated a small box to each game, placing the opposing teams' helmets facing each other above a short write-up on what to expect on the field from the

teams. Listed in between the helmets and the write-up glared the point-spread, which is what interested me most.

Dad explained the term "spreads" or "point-spreads" or "line" to me by saying that the guys who perfected sports betting got tired of just betting on who would win and who would lose. Most of the time, everyone agreed on who would win a matchup, so there had to be a way to convince someone to wager on the other guys. The answer is to give the underdog a few points. My cousin, whom I call Wig, is five years older than his brother, whom I call Chlope (pronounced: klOp, not clop), and when we were younger, he was a good foot taller, so to get him to accept a drive-way basketball game Wig would say, "I'll give you a 10-to-nothing head start, going to 20." It worked. Chlope would play him and depending on the outcome, they would adjust the spread accordingly. It's the same thing in sports betting, but the teams playing don't actually get the points. If the spread is Giants over Packers by 6, then the Giants win if they win by anything over 6 points. If they win by exactly 6 points, then the wager is a draw. No true gambler likes a draw, though, so sports betting evolved to include half-points. There is no way to score a half-point in football, so there is no way that Giants by 6.5 could result in a draw.

Since the spread, in theory, evened the playing field, Dad told me I could choose a side on any of the games I wanted in the paper and he would take the other team for as much money as I'd like to bet. He wanted me to choose the games that were on the channels we could watch, and I did at first. Sitting amongst the other kids at church, I couldn't concentrate. Why would I care about who had or had not held hands at the ballpark when I had a whole quarter riding on the 49ers game that was kicking off in ten minutes? I'd run the three blocks down Main Street from the church to my house as soon as the benediction had been said. There was nothing more

exhilarating than turning on that TV and seeing those grown men play their hearts out for me—a kid—and my small bank account.

It was around this same time that my parents bought me the computer game based on PBS's educational television show *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?* The premise of the game was to travel the world gathering clues about where the villain might be hiding "the loot." Informants would give you vague hints forcing you to open the accompanying desk encyclopedia to see where the ancient Mayans used to live or where Mary Cassatt was born—the game's intention was to instill that knowledge into your brain forever. The game also had a place where your character could enter into the detective's lounge to grab a cup of coffee. A digital cup would drop from an instant-coffee vending machine and then it would be filled with digital coffee on the screen. Sometimes, that is. Sometimes the cup would fall over and coffee would spill out of the machine onto your toppled cup, or sometimes the machine would simply take your digital dime without dispensing anything. The detective's lounge was just a novelty of the game and it was never intended that a player would spend any significant amount of time there. My girlfriend Liz, who also had the game as a kid, says she doesn't even remember the detective's lounge existing at all. After I'd had the game awhile, though, it was sometimes the only reason my cousins and I would turn it on.

"I bet you don't get a cup of coffee this time," Wig would say.

"I bet you a nickel I *do* get a cup of coffee," I'd respond.

We'd sit there for hours, taking each other's bets on whether I would get the coffee. From there, the need to gamble spread like a rumor through a sorority house inside us and we were betting on Nintendo games, Monopoly, or a game of HORSE in the driveway. A win—no matter the game—became no longer worth it, unless money changed hands. Money meant that there

was a way to keep score between us. We saw no difference in the way we kept score as compared to the way all other Americans kept score. The person holding the money at the end of the day was clearly the winner.

We had also grown up playing tennis, but as Wig and I entered junior high and high school athletics, we got more serious about the game. We were built for tennis—tall, long-armed and skinny. My parents forked up hard-earned dollars for me to get weekly private lessons in Little Rock, half an hour away. And Wig went to a sleepaway tennis camp at a nearby private college. We were blue-collar kids from a blue-collar town and private-schooled rich kids dominated tennis in our region of the country. We didn't know where they went to church. My coach taught me a pretty strong topspin that I've relied on ever since. Wig picked up a consistent backhand stroke that I immediately envied. But because he was at a sleepaway camp, he learned other things that I couldn't pick up from my weekly lessons.

In the boys' dormitory at the college where he went to camp, he ended up in a room with a bunch of kids playing cards. By that time, Wig, Chlope and I were playing cards on the regular. Our dads or our friends or our dads' friends had taught us the basics of the poker games—Five-Card Draw, Seven-Card Stud, et cetera—but the games Wig played with these kids changed everything. He lost all of the money his parents had sent with him to eat on at camp, but the way he looked at it, he had bought the knowledge of how to play a game called In Between. We immediately threw it into the mix of games we played.

Everyone antes, say, a quarter. If there are four people, there's a dollar in the pot. The first player is dealt two cards, and then given the opportunity to bet that the next card will be in between the first two. For example, if the two cards are a Four and a Queen, then the player has the option of wagering up to a dollar that the next card will be a 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, or a Jack. If he

wants, though, he can just bet a quarter or fifty cents, anything up to whatever is in the pot. If the next card is in between, then he pulls the amount wagered from the pot. If the next card is outside the two cards—in this case a 2, 3, King or Ace—then he must pay the amount wagered. The real thrill of the game comes, though, when the third card pulled is equal to one of the first two cards—Four or Queen. If the player is unlucky enough to draw this card, then he must double the amount wagered. If he wagered the full dollar, then he must put two dollars into the pot. Or, if the player doesn't think the next card will fall in between the first two cards, he may always just pass without wagering anything. Of course, there's no fun in that, though.

In Between taught us how quickly stakes could be raised when we weren't paying attention, or even if we were. In the heat of the moment, it was easy to think *4/Q, seven winners are out there, four losers, good odds, bet the pot*. In the heat of the moment, when there is a twenty-dollar bill out there that could be yours in an instant, you think there's no way another Four or a Queen will come up next. But then it does come up and instead of claiming the \$20, you owe \$40. And then the poor bastard going next is blinded by the \$60 in the pot when he gets a Two and a King. The Ace hitting seems impossible, much less another Two or a King. But just about the time he is sure it won't come, it does, and he pays \$120 to the pot.

Playing cards became popular among the guys I went to school with. Lots of times after church, we Methodists gathered up around the table at someone's parents' house. Mom and Dad were always happy to host, or my friend Bear's mother's house down the street always made for a good spot. I remember keeping an old cigar box full of silver change for just such occasions. Across town, the Church of Christ kids did exactly the same thing. Each group of us played the same games of poker with slight variations in rules and stakes. I remember feeling a certain pride when I realized that while they were still playing with dimes, we had started playing with dollars.

Not that we weren't in exactly the same socio-economic class—the majority of our parents all worked at the school and they all sat together at football games. As far as I know, there wasn't much of a Baptist game going on in town, but the Baptists are notorious for keeping their sins well hidden, so I guess it's possible.

When we first started, eight or ten of us usually initiated the game, but a lot of folks played until their five dollars disappeared and then they were content to watch or leave. (I can't recall ever having done either of those two things.) The rest of us regularly played until the sun came up.

We played dealer's choice—the deal rotated clockwise, whoever dealt got to choose the game. Someone chose Five-Card Draw, someone else would choose Low Chicago. Once In Between came up, though, it usually dominated the table for a while because it only ended once the pot had been completely emptied. And some people chose to sit out when a game with potential stakes like that came around. I took pride in being eager to get the game started, to risk my whole pile of change. I hated playing football and I feared getting into a fistfight, but I had the guts to play whatever card game anyone else wanted to, and I had the guts to lose my money. Putting it down on paper, right now, it sounds a little ridiculous, but I don't think most people have the guts to lose, and I am proud that I do. It seemed like lots of guys had the guts to play and bet lots of money, but the real pride came in having the guts to lose.

Next time you're involved in a home poker game, pay attention to the people's behavior. There are the people who come expecting to lose. They show up saying how they're not as good as everyone else and they'll try out the common joke that they're here to "contribute" their \$50 or whatever the stakes may be. And when they lose, they take it in stride, make another clichéd joke and leave. These people aren't gamblers. They don't have enough interest to even understand why

they're losing. They don't want to analyze their play to get any better. They just want to be a part of the social activity that is poker. They're dead money—money that doesn't fight back. The joke isn't actually a joke at all because it is, in fact, *contributed*. But I respect these players because they don't play with much, and they don't complain when they lose it.

And then there are those I do have a hard time respecting. Someone at your home poker game will come in eager to play. He will have lots of cash on hand and he will reference the last game he played and probably mention specific hands. He will be eager to play stakes as high as anyone else in the room wants to play. He will be aggressive, always betting or raising or re-raising. He has the guts to bet a lot of money and everyone will be in awe of him, and he will love it. Maybe he'll win. I always hope he'll lose. And then you can watch what happens when he loses, when he displays his true character. He will stomp his feet and come up with reasons that he lost and he will look in his pockets for more money he can raise your bet with, but it isn't there and then he will be pissed off when he leaves. On the way out, he will tell the person who took his last dollar how he played the hand poorly. This loser has no more guts now that his money is gone. It's easy to have the guts to play and play big. Someone like that doesn't think about the possibility of losing and so when it happens, it blindsides him and his inner-coward is exposed. Everyone should witness it from time to time—it's beautiful—the rarity of getting to see what's behind the facade you've always known was just a facade.

The true gambler takes the time to come up with a plan, to anticipate the possibility of loss and to prepare for it. Of course the true gambler hopes he will win, but he knows the risks involved. Should he lose, he will not make a big to-do about it, he will not make an excuse. The true gambler stands up and walks away respectfully from both his opponents and the game. And he will revise his strategy, and be back the next day.

In high school, we sat around the dining room table at Wig and Chlope's parents', my aunt and uncle's house. We usually played with dollars and quarters; it was still a friendly game to anyone who wanted to drop by and join us. It was still friendly enough that their dad, my uncle Mike, sat down and joined us. We all wanted him to because he was a father to us all, and like fathers and sons, we felt the always present need inside us to be closer to him, to share our experiences with him. It was the same feeling my dad felt when he decided to teach me to gamble on football games with him—we were supposed to bond. Dad and I didn't look at the games the same way, though. He liked betting on two or three and then watching them on TV. I liked having money on the two or three we watched on TV, but I also liked having money on every game that flashed across the score ticker at the bottom of the screen. Recently, I asked Dad why we ever quit betting on football games together. His answer is clear indication that there is a difference in the inner workings of my brain compared to his.

"As I recall," Dad said, "it got to be where it was all too much to keep up with. We were betting 10, 12, 14 games and it seems it always came out to be a wash, or something close to it. When we were doing two or three games and we could sit and watch the game, that was fun. Too many games wasn't much fun anymore."

I heard his words, but inside, I couldn't disagree more. With the increase in the number of games we bet on, I felt like the fun was just getting started. Keeping up with so many wasn't hard for me at all. I made lists that were easy to check. I was preparing to bet on basketball next, or baseball, where each team had a 162-game season. Dad removed himself from any idea of that, though.

I don't remember what the pot was up to in our game of In Between around Uncle Mike's table that night, but the concerned, yet exhilarated look on my uncle's face revealed he was

becoming well acquainted with the thrills and devastation of the game. The cards made their way around to each of us and each of us sighed with relief when we got cards that had to be passed—6 and a 10, 8 and a Queen, 2 and a 7. The muscles tensed when the dealer presented a player with something maybe worth playing—4 and a King, 2 and a Jack, 4 and an Ace. Mike had taken a couple of bad losses and we all saw his frustration. I remember thinking that he'd sat down with the idea that he would join the boys for a few laughs and maybe make five or ten bucks, maybe lose it in good fun, but still be happy. Now that he'd put a few twenties into the pot, though, he was in too deep to quit. You can't walk away from actual money in the pot, you can't not take a chance at getting it back. Quitting only locked in the loss. Mike dealt with his frustration by getting stubborn. He bet on things he shouldn't have bet and when he had to double a large amount, he simply said, "No, too much," and he grabbed his twenties from the pot and walked away from the game. The three of us looked at each other, all thinking the same thing, that he couldn't simply take money back that he had lost fair and square, but no one said a word.

Mike never played what we began referring to as Crazy Games with us anymore. Our gambling had evolved to a new level of seriousness that was not intended for any man not willing to lose more than he'd initially planned. There was no sitting down with \$20 to try your luck anymore. Not with something like In Between where a \$20 bet could mean losing \$40, and more if you want to try to get it back. It's only natural to want to get it back.

## Chapter 3

### Powering the Machine

My sister Laura used to work at an architecture firm that made the bulk of their business designing casinos. I didn't know her company's focus when she took the job, but when she gave me the tour around her office, the tiny models of multiple gambling halls on large drafting tables made it clear. Framed blueprints, drawn as directions to create buildings that had only been imagined, hung on the walls of the office beside framed photographs of the now-realized casinos. The message was as obvious as it was motivating: *We set out to build a beautiful building, and we did precisely that.* The long row of frames eliminated any inkling in the viewer's mind that the accuracy of the project in the first frame had been a fluke.

Behind all the cubicles and offices the firm had a reference library of products, shelves and shelves of binders, which held all the current resources available to designers—the tiles that might line the bathroom floors, the lamps that might light the restaurant's tables, the wallpaper that might adorn the casino's slot room. When the designer has chosen all of the items that will go inside the casino, she builds a collage of pictures and samples by placing them on what is called a board. That board will be shown to the client for approval, and during my tour of Laura's office, boards leaned in seemingly every cubicle as the designers slowly put each of them together over the course of weeks, or maybe even months. I could tell these people, these artists, had put time into designing these projects. They had poured over hundreds and hundreds of samples and carefully chosen one thing because of how it interacted with another.

The first *real* casino—a big one with an in-house marketing team—I ever went to wasn't at all like the first casino I went to, which was an aluminum box on an Indian reservation just over the Oklahoma border from my home state of Arkansas. No one had ever presented a board of the aluminum box's interior to anyone before its erection, and it shared a parking lot with a truck-stop, but I assure you that it was a beautiful place. Unlike the casinos my sister's firm built, nothing inside that one-room building had been carefully chosen by any artist, but everything fit together just as well, and even more organically. First, the lack of windows and clocks. The low lighting, and the cigarette-smoke haze drifting up from ash trays—every single one in use—on nearly every flat surface available. The place had a sweatshop feel to it, if sweatshops were manned with volunteer. Old people sat one beside the other on low-backed stools and puffed at the cigarettes each held in one hand while slapping the large plastic buttons on the slot machines with the other hand. No one talked. Everyone manned their machines. They were part of the machine. The engine that kept the lights flashing, the bells ringing and the reels turning. Everyone belonged. Including the 19-year-old kid—me—standing just inside the door, wide-eyed and eager to volunteer, to help keep the machine running.

I don't remember how my finances turned out that night I drove to Oklahoma by myself, but I remember not caring one way or the other. At that age, in my circle of friends, gambling experience registered more than results, at least to an extent. After all, we couldn't go to the *real* casinos because we weren't 21, so my visit to the Native American-sponsored casino gained me credibility, at least around the poker table I shared with my high school friends, as an adult gambler. I savored it. Any time the subject of gambling came up in conversation, I found a way to mention that "Yeah, I've been to the Indian casino" in a no-big-whoop sort of way. As if the

experience weren't the shining star on my life resume, the only bullet point under the highlighted label *I'm edgy: Envy/Date Me*.

I often wonder if that's what appealed to me about gambling—its edge. I never had a lot of edge. My parents raised me to be a good kid, and I wanted to please them by being exactly that. The Floyd United Methodists, who met in a small rock church 15 miles from the nearest traffic light, which only flashed red, taught me the 1980s version of right from wrong and how to be a friend to my neighbor. I'm forever grateful to the family and the community that explained to me how to live in harmony with the rest of the world. To me, that is the greatest knowledge a person can behold.

But I also wanted to get laid. My friend Jesse had a t-shirt that said: *Moms love good boys, but chicks dig bad boys*. My own mother told me that I would impress women with my immaculate ironing skills and ability to properly put clean sheets on a bed. I took that to heart, and still do, but my hospital corners are wasted on the woman I love because she doesn't like her sheets tucked in at all. She reaps the benefits of my straight-lacedness in other ways, though. For instance, a small Post-It note beside my grandmother's toilet taught me that: *If you sprinkle, when you tinkle, be a sweetie and wipe the seatie*. I've been a sweetie and wiped the rim ever since I envisioned the possible horror of having someone I respect come behind me into a bathroom and upon finding tinkle sprinkled, think I did it. Even if I notice the sprinkles before I tinkle, so that sprinkled tinkle couldn't possibly be mine, I'll still be a sweetie afterward and wipe someone else's sprinkle. This is how much edge I lack.

A lot of my friends in high school gained their edginess by smoking pot, and I always participated when someone offered, but I took the Bill Clinton approach, not inhaling much back then. I liked holding a cigarette, but I never liked the taste. Swisher Sweets makes a cigarillo that

tasted pretty good, but if I was going to buy something at the gas station that tasted good, I thought I might as well buy an Oatmeal Creme Pie. The hard drugs my friends were experimenting with scared the bejeezus out of me, so I stayed pretty far away. I huffed a can of gasoline once and put my dad's Lincoln into a ditch when I passed out at the wheel. That was kind of edgy, I guess, but mostly just stupid. I knew that from the beginning, but sometimes when you find all your friends in a circle in a dark garage listening to The Doors, all you want to do is belong, even if it means behaving recklessly.

At a young age, my dad and Uncle Mike had let me take sips from their beers, but the first time I really had a drink I took shots of Jose Quervo Gold from the plastic bottle cap at Amy Allen's party with my friend Rory, whom I met at Ms. Dorthea's daycare when I was four years old. The act could've given us a perceived edge except that we decided to morph ourselves into super heroes and run as fast as we could from the front yard, through the house, to the backyard, and returning to the front yard, all the while shouting "Thundercats, HOOOOOO!" In our defense, it was supposed to be a sophomores-only party and we were coping with the frustration of having the junior and senior guys showing up to steal the attention of our female classmates. We lashed out in childish ways by pretending to have a grasp on the things intended for adults.

## Chapter 4

### The Moneymaker Effect

A few years passed and I learned to handle drinking in a more acceptable fashion—alone at the bar. I didn't watch TV at home, but when I went to bars, I remember being astonished at seeing poker shown on TV like it was a spectator sport, but there the cards were on the screen. And just as astonishing, people—mostly dudes—were eating it up. Any stranger I plopped down next to had a poker story about playing with his buddies and yada, yada, yada. And of course, so did I. Tens of thousands of viewers watching every bet, every bluff, every pot I dragged? Playing poker on TV seemed like an impossible dream.

But then Chris Moneymaker came along in that summer, in 2003. He was an accountant from Knoxville, Tennessee. He had a day job. He turned his hat around backwards, he wore a pair of Oakley sunglasses at the table, he had a few extra pounds, and he kept a five o'clock shadow with a goatee. This guy was as regular as they come. But, just the same, there he was, on ESPN winning the World Series of Poker Main Event, worth \$2.5 million dollars.

"He proved that anyone, truly anyone, can become the next world champion of poker," the ESPN commentator said as Moneymaker shook his final opponent's hand. The statement worked in two ways. First, Moneymaker was a regular guy. Second, the tournament had an entry fee of \$10,000, which should prevent "truly anyone" from entering. However, Moneymaker didn't pay that fee. Instead, he won his seat by playing a satellite tournament online, which only cost him \$39. Playing poker online was a fairly new concept to the general public in 2003. There

were a collection of computer geeks who had been playing a version of online poker for a few years, but it was hard to navigate, not just any poker enthusiast could sit down at the table. Until 2001, when PokerStars and PartyPoker launched their sites, which were easier to navigate, opening the door to anyone who knew the game, and also those who didn't.

By Valentine's Day 2004, when I spent the afternoon waiting by the phone for the girl who sat behind me in Spanish class to call, Paradise Poker was the largest online poker website. I grew up in a county where it was illegal to buy a six-pack of beer, so being able to sit there in my dad's house, while they were out of town, and play poker? Surely not. I did a quick search on the legality of such business. For the life of me, I can't remember what ambiguities I found out on the legal side of things, but whatever it was, it didn't deter me from going to Paradise Poker, which looked legit, if based on nothing more than the aesthetics of the website—palm trees, gold name-plates, and most importantly, a Visa logo. And if my eager curiosity hadn't sold me on the idea of participating yet, Paradise offered a 100% deposit bonus, meaning that if I deposited \$100, they gave me credit for depositing \$200. It seemed like such a good deal that I deposited \$300. Just like that, I was sitting at the tables, playing for real money from the comfort of my own home.

I'd been frustrated so many times in the past with wanting to play poker, but not being able to gather up enough players to get a game going. But plenty of folks seemed to be right there at Paradise, presumably all the time. Game changer. Before I'd even bet a dime, I hoped the girl from Spanish class would never call. I didn't make a lot of friends in college, and I was lonely, but I immediately saw the potential of online gambling for being more of a friend than anyone I could meet at school. People always talk about how with close friends there's no need to even talk because the presence of that friend says more than any words ever can. In an instant,

that's exactly how I felt about those anonymous names sitting around the table—leadpipe, Aces69, BeckhamSucks—betting at the pot, with a shared understanding of, and a strong desire to play poker.

The girl from Spanish never called, but even if she had, I'd already begun thinking of excuses for why I couldn't go on our date. Again, nothing against the girl, but the idea of playing poker online took things to a new level for me. I spent the night playing long tournaments, racing downstairs to the kitchen to microwave myself frozen taquitos in between hands. I played all night long. I felt like I was getting away with something. Like at any minute, someone was going to figure out what was going on—that people were playing poker on the Internet for real money—and it would be shut down. I needed to take advantage while I could. I'm not sure who I thought would shut it down—not my parents or the government exactly, but more like some faceless entity who only existed on paper.

Signing up to play online poker that day, I contributed to what eventually became known as the Moneymaker Effect. A bunch of people like me saw an amateur player, a nobody, take down the legends of poker, and we all wanted to be the next nobody to do the same. Players flocked to the online card tables. When Moneymaker won at the World Series of Poker in 2003, there were 839 players in the main event. The following year, after he proved that it was anybody's game, a patent attorney named Greg Raymer outlasted 2,575 other players who entered. The numbers from 2003 to 2004 show a significant growth any well-educated investor would envy. And that's just the main event of the World Series of Poker, which costs \$10,000 to enter. Think about all the little tournaments across the country in brick and mortar casinos that costs \$100. Or the tournaments online that cost \$1. More people have a buck to throw on a quick poker tournament than people who have \$10,000, as well as the time and the means to get to Las

Vegas in July. Not to mention the significant other who would allow such a thing to happen. If a \$10,000 tournament saw a 307% increase in its field of players in a single year, the online industry saw a large multiple of that. To my knowledge, no one's got the numbers for that single year, but in 2000, online gambling had an estimated annual revenue of \$82 million, and by 2005, the number was around \$2 billion.

In 2003, Paradise Poker didn't seem like it was going anywhere for a while, so I felt less of a need to seize my opportunity, meaning I stopped playing as much, though I did still play twice a week or so. One day at my mother's house, I played the big Sunday tournament Paradise had at the time, which cost about a hundred bucks to enter and had a guaranteed \$500,000 prize pool, or something close to that number, which was pretty big at the time. To me, it's still big. I folded a lot, and when I got good cards, I played them well enough to get me in the money, which means I outlasted the 80% or so of the rest of the people who played in the tournament who would not get paid. The money they had contributed to the prize pool would go toward paying the top 20% of us.

My mother and my sister sat in the den watching TV when I walked out of our makeshift home office.

"I just made \$3,800," I told them.

"How?" my sister asked.

"Playing poker, online."

My mother looked stunned while she tried to determine how such a thing could be possible. I knew her concerns were probably genuine—after all, I'd never determined the legality of the whole deal—but I did my best to keep her from voicing such concerns. I didn't want to think about those things. Instead, I wanted them to be proud of me—\$3,800 is a lot of money.

"How do you get the money?" my mother asked.

"I just request a check," I said, "and they'll send me one." I'd seen the button before to do just that, but I'd never pushed it. And it would be years before I ever did. For the time being, I put the money right back into the game.

## Chapter 5

### My First Withdrawal

Hospitals, like airports and casinos, make me feel alive. In casino's people have an electric charge about them; they have a hope in them that something great might happen at any moment. In airports, people are reunited with those who have been away; they think that because someone is home now, things will be better. And people, at least the ones who don't work in hospitals, generally interact with each other at crucial points in their lives—births, deaths, near-deaths of their own or someone they care deeply for. People have come to this place for some physical intervention into the way the body is currently operating. Shared eye-contact in the waiting room with those who wait around me brings with it a camaraderie. The looks I get express and expect both sympathy and guilt. Did your teenage daughter get hit by a drunk driver or did your father eat too many chicken fried steaks after the doctor told him not to? There is a solemn quiet in the waiting room. If the uneducated-looking family in the corner gets loud, even laughs, everyone else in the room exchanges glances again, either to say "It must be nice to be happy," or "Out of respect for why we're all here, someone needs to shut them up." I wonder what people think I'm doing here, alone, reading my book. Am I the dedicated son of an ailing mother? Or the only friend the guy who overdosed over the weekend has left?

Neither. I'm waiting for my friend Ray to deliver a box of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts to the nursing staff—it's his most effective sales strategy. He sells oxygen, but he calls his product by its molecular make-up, "O-2." He drives all over Little Rock, from medical clinic to hospital,

trying to convince doctors and nurses to buy his oxygen for their patients, or at least to suggest to their patients that they use him for their at-home oxygen needs. I don't really understand how his deal works because I just sit in the waiting rooms.

Ray went to Ms. Dorthea's daycare with Rory and me, and the three of us had been really good, if not best friends, ever since. About the time we graduated high school, I spent every weekend at his house, drinking Jim Beam and memorizing *The Big Lebowski* until someone came over who might want to play some cards with us. We maintained a similar status throughout the few years following high school.

With only a semester left before graduating from college, I panicked. The future was just too fucking big, I think. I got rid of my phone, sold my car and decided I would walk across the country, every step from Los Angeles to New York. Things didn't go exactly as planned, so after walking from Los Angeles to Sedona, Arizona, I started hitchhiking and didn't quit until I'd gotten to Surf City, North Carolina after being on the road for a total of three and a half months. Standing with my feet in the Atlantic Ocean, I realized I needed to go home, so I hitchhiked back to Arkansas and maintained my transient lifestyle, albeit with a home base. A friend supplied me with a somewhat abandoned RV deep in the woods of the foothills of the Ozark Mountains for ten days. My dad and step-mother owned an old house in the country where they let me hole up in, sometimes going entire days without turning on a light. When I searched for plane tickets to go see Wig where he was in seminary training in Dallas, I realized my ticket would cost less if I stayed for two weeks, so I did. I had no obligation to be anywhere or to do anything.

That's when Ray called. He'd gotten a DUI and his license had been suspended, which prevented him from being able to make his sales calls, going from doctor to doctor. His boss told him they would have to fire him unless he found a way to make those sales calls. In exchange for

driving him around, he offered me his car, including the gas that went into it, during off-duty hours, plus \$50 a week. I could wear whatever I wanted, but I had to stay in the car out in the parking lot or I could take shelter from the Arkansas summer heat in the waiting room of each stop. Really, I saw it for what it was, me in my t-shirt and camouflage cut-off shorts hanging out with my friend in his button-down and tie. I was kind of just hanging out anyway, so I might as well get a car and \$50 per week out of it.

Despite the small amount, drawing a paycheck and leaving the office—dropping Ray off at his house—at the end of the week felt good. I had big plans this weekend. A week before I took the job as Ray's chauffeur, I'd gone to the casino in Tunica, Mississippi with Wig and Chlope, where I took a seat at the No Limit Hold'em cash game, as opposed to a tournament. Signs all around the poker room advertised the upcoming World Series of Poker Circuit Event in town starting the next weekend. Up \$500 playing the cash game, Wig and Chlope convinced me my success was a sign that I should come back and play the first event of the WSOP, which was \$550. Really, I just wanted to pocket my money for the night, but I found myself negotiating with them. I told them I'd come back if I made \$1,000 before we left. Baffled, I made the grand and agreed to play the tournament.

I stopped at the bank beside Ray's house, not my usual branch. The teller sat in her carved-out window with a smiling face, pretty white teeth and dark hair with large curls. I withdrew \$600 cash and left. I'd saved every penny I'd earned from the time my parents opened my savings account with \$24 when I was a small child. I'd worked hard at various minimum wage jobs, accumulating around \$25,000, and I didn't get there by making withdrawals. I remember going to the Citizen's Bank in Beebe and as I approached the teller, Rose

Richardson—a woman I'd known from my grandmother's church since I'd been born—asking me if I wanted to make a deposit or withdrawal before she looked up.

"I'm sorry, Guy," she said, "I didn't realize it was you." And then she slid me a deposit slip. Maybe there's something about the way Rose Richardson used to recognize me, some feeling of satisfaction at being a regular, that I later got from the guy checking IDs at the casino doors.

With the money in a white envelope, tucked into my black backpack in the passenger seat of the Mercury Cougar Ray's dad had handed down to him, headed toward my sister Laura's house in Memphis, I wondered if I was simply throwing money away. Maybe I should just have had a nice dinner with her and her husband and not made the half-hour drive over to the casino in Tunica the next morning. I left the casino a winner, though, and the greatest marketing strategy the casino ever employed was letting a few folks exit with more money than they entered with. Winning money is fun—no one has ever doubted that—and it's addictive.

## Chapter 6

### The Road to Tunica

Memphis is dirty. Even on the really clean streets like my sister's, which provides the border separating the Memphis Country Club golf course from a nice middle-class neighborhood, something still feels dirty. The streets are like the bathroom floor of the Captain D's fast-food restaurant on South 3rd Street—it's as clean as it can get, but you know that it's still dirty as hell. Fast-food restaurants are the best-looking buildings on 3rd Street in South Memphis, which turns into Highway 61, the highway where the famous blues musician Robert Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the devil. The road goes from a five-lane to a seven-lane once you get farther down it to where cash advance establishments, liquor stores and pawn shops clutter it up pretty good. Desperate, bored-looking African-Americans walk up and down the street in a way that makes me nervous because even though it's 2005, I still feel like their entire race blames me—a clean-cut white kid in a borrowed late-90s model Black Mercury Cougar—for the reason the Lorraine Motel has become a museum. It's only ten miles and 37 years back up 3rd Street where the Reverend Martin Luther King, Junior was shot on the motel's balcony too close for anyone to forget about just yet. I've never been in a city where the color of my skin still matters so much as it does in Memphis.

Seventeen miles from my sister's house, though, I drive over the Mississippi state line and the pavement changes to something I wouldn't mind eating off of. My tires seem to exhale and relax as much as I do. The shoulders open up and things are green in all directions. There's a

bend in the road right there at the border so even 3rd Street immediately seems to be replaced with healthy trees and mowed grass in my rearview. If my dad or Uncle Mike or any other normal Southern man had ever made this drive with me, they would quickly identify these miles and miles of row crops as being planted with soybeans or wheat or whatever it was they had been planted with, but I didn't pay close enough attention to notice. All I see planted in those fields are the rows of billboards lining each side of the highway. They're one after the other and the casinos lease them in increments of five or so at a time. Behind only Las Vegas and Atlantic City, Tunica, Mississippi is the 3rd largest gambling mecca in the country. Believe it or not, people come from all over the United States to gamble at the casinos surrounded by nothing but fields. Players have a choice in where they gamble—there's competition out here—which explains the need for billboards. The Horseshoe, Bally's, The Sheraton, The Grand, Fitzgerald's, Sam's Town, Hollywood, Gold Strike, The Resort—there are plenty of players to justify them all operating on a 24-hour day, but greed is what drives the industry, from both sides, and so they constantly fight a war on the sides of Highway 61 just south of Memphis with billboards serving as mercenaries. The Fitz advertises full-pay double-deck blackjack, The Horseshoe reminds drivers that B.B. King will be playing soon, and Hollywood has a \$1 seafood buffet for new players. For every 15 casino billboards, there is probably one for something else—the Tunica Visitor's Bureau or a bail bondsman or one of those billboards with plain, white text against an all-black background that says something like, "I love you—God," or sometimes something a little more aggressive like, "If you gamble, burn in hell—God." Just a brief interruption before the next billboard reminds you that Sam's Town gives free t-shirts to new members on Tuesdays with 30 minutes of slot play.

Long before drivers actually get to the casinos, they can see the Grand on the horizon. The desert sand is to Las Vegas what the low-lying row crops are to Tunica. The Vegas Strip is plagued by tourists like kids who are in awe of the lights and young professionals excited about being on the list of some high-end dance club. There are camera stores and vendors selling gadgets. There's the nightly shows—Celine Dion, Donnie and Marie Osmond, Penn and Teller— attracting all kinds of people who don't belong in gambling towns. Those Latinos handing out glossy postcards of women who are naked except for the Photoshopped stars they have covering their hoo-hahs drive me nuts. The sidewalks are already crowded enough on the Strip without them. But, is driving better than walking in Las Vegas? No. Cars, too, are bumper to bumper. There are even trucks in traffic that are hauling nothing but an advertisement. The actual *job* of those trucks is to get stuck in traffic so the huge signs they carry can be viewed by the people stuck on the sidewalks. Since when did it become so hard to access a fucking blackjack table in Las Vegas?

In Tunica, once the Grand becomes visible from a few miles out, Highway 61 South becomes the final lap at Daytona. The speed limit stays 70 miles per hour, but something feels so natural about doing 90 on that stretch, and that's validated when the guy in the next car passes by going even faster. Again, these are 24-hour casinos, but those of us pushing the limits of our cars' abilities know that time won't actually stop until we are inside the building with no clocks, and so we must hurry to get there. Though today, I have an appointment specifically at noon.

Just when it seems little progress is being made, like the Grand will perpetually be out of reach, the sign on the edge of the property welcomes gamblers. The property is huge, and it takes a few minutes to drive from one side to the other, from the turnoff to the casino. The long driveway cuts through the 18-hole golf course designed by someone I've never heard of, but who

is important enough to brag about. There's a convention center, a full-service spa and salon, tennis courts, indoor/outdoor pools, restaurants, an RV resort, and a place to shoot sporting clays. The thing that impresses me most about the property, though, is that they have their own water tower. The giant bulbous tower lifted up above the earth functions in a way that makes me think a person could essentially live here. It gives the impression that the Grand is self-sustainable, which of course, it is not, but it makes me feel that way enough that I have tried to imagine scenarios in which I literally live at the casino in one of the various hotels. I've talked to players around the poker tables who have done two-week poker binges where they got the special poker room rate of \$20 per night, which comes out to a rate of something cheaper than what a decent apartment in neighboring Memphis would cost. And the thing is, living at the casino would drastically lower my grocery bill and eliminate my liquor store bill altogether because the casinos in Tunica take care of their players. They comp me a buffet or at least a few bucks at the snack bar so I can get a slice of pizza—all drinks are free.

In the end, though, I know I can't live at the casino because my family won't approve of such a thing. I come from hard-working people who place a high value on work ethic and love the story of *A River Runs Through It*. I was raised to be a Norman Maclean—the down-to-earth-brother-who-takes-his-mother-to-church type—but a large part of me steers toward being a Paul Maclean—who tends to rebel against his Presbyterian upbringing with liquor and gambling. Sometimes when I mention to my mother that I'm playing poker, she gets an anxious look on her face and holds her fingers crookedly into the air as a way to remind me of the scene in which Paul gets his hands broken because he can't pay his gambling debts. I tell her that I'm not playing with those kinds of people: I'm not going to a speakeasy deep in the woods of Montana. I'm

playing out in the open, in the lights of a publicly traded company, but I don't think it makes her feel any better.

In Mississippi, the casinos are only allowed to operate on the water. God-fearing locals weren't happy with the idea that casinos were going to come to town and become sin factories, so the state legislators passed a law saying the casinos had to be contained on boats. The idea was that the boats would create tourism, which God has no problem with, rather than just casinos. However, no one wanted to come be a tourist in north Mississippi, it turned out, but they did want to come be sinners. Or more likely, Mississippians themselves wanted to do a little sinning, despite what the preachers said, and if they had to take a boat ride to do it, so be it. They'd pile onto the boats, take a ride up river a bit while they played a little blackjack, then the boat would turn around, drop off those with no more money and pick up a fresh load of people who just arrived from the closest ATM.

After a while, once everyone saw how much of a boost to the local economy casinos could be, and locals realized just how much fun gambling could be, it started to seem less and less like a sin. And it was just downright annoying to have to wait on the boat to dock again to either embark or disembark. Waiting, one way or the other, could make a person late for church, for Chrissake. So the government in Mississippi decided it was only necessary for the boats to leave the dock once a year, and that the boats would have to go at least a mile upstream when they did. So, once a year, they did exactly that—one mile out, one mile back—before the riverboat sat there in the dock for another whole year.

Eventually someone decided the process was just a hassle, so they did away with the law, and allowed gamblers to come and go as they pleased, whenever they wanted. Of course, the local God-fearing congregants still insisted the casinos be on the water—for whatever reason—

and the gaming companies knew it was a small price to pay for what they were getting. Now, instead of building a casino on the river, they just build a casino, dig a moat around it and fill the moat with water to give the illusion it's on the river. Everybody's happy with that, I guess, and it makes for a pleasant feeling when you cross the small bridge and enter the casino, on schedule to sin.

There's a short walk from the entrance across the gaming floor—packed with loud, flashy slot machines, begging for attention in the demanding way that toddlers do—to the escalators, and as I ascend the escalator, I feel my nerves settle. The ringing sound of the slots is slowly replaced with the sound of poker chips clicking against each other, which has a calming effect. Upstairs there is no music, there is no distraction. This is a place of concentrated thought, like a library where books have been replaced with decks of cards, which scholars take turns picking apart around felt-topped tables.

A short line is formed at the entrance to the poker room under a sign labeling a tall desk "Registration." The men in the line are generally a mix of three types, it seems. Young guys in hoodies and flat-billed baseball caps, trying to make a name for themselves, old guys who have plenty of money and are wearing a lot of gold jewelry, and then some middle-agers who would probably best describe themselves as "no-bullshit" type of guys. Of course, I don't fit any of those descriptions because I'm unique and know exactly what I'm getting into here. Yeah, that's it. I'm 23, in a trucker's shirt I got from Goodwill, which brandishes the name Richardo. I've got my trusty black Jansport backpack over my shoulder—inside it, a jacket and \$600 in cash. The guy in front of me hands the woman standing behind the desk his \$550 to get into the tournament like it's nothing. I remind myself the entry fee is nearly three month's salary for me at the moment, but I reach into my bag and finger out six one-hundred dollar bills. I'm nervous as hell.

I count the money over and over, but I can't stop thinking I've got it wrong, even though I've been counting to six confidently for years now.

In exchange for my money, the woman behind the counter hands me a small piece of paper, slightly less durable, but with the thickness of posterboard, a surface area not much bigger than a slice of bread. It's a receipt that identifies my starting table and seat assignment—Table 35, Seat 6. At the top of the receipt is another reminder of how much this experience is costing me. With an hour until the tournament starts, I decide to grab some lunch at Replays, the bar across from the tournament room. I'm nervous even handling the menu, donning a poker face seems altogether impossible. I order a bloody mary and start to feel better. I order another bloody mary and start to feel lucky.

Waves of men and a scattering of a few women players are making their way past the registration desk and into the tournament room, which has the feel of a large banquet hall. Long, black drapes hang from the walls and over the few entryways, giving the room a sort of sound-proof quality. The decorations consist of a few World Series of Poker logos and portraits of WSOP superstars, whose faces we've all learned from TV over the past couple of years since poker became cool—Doyle Brunson, Johnny Chan, Jesus Ferguson. Large, flat-screened televisions are distributed evenly throughout the room, each displaying information vital to the tournament—total remaining players, average chip stack, time until the next level when the blinds will be raised. Off to the left, in the back of the room is an elevated platform holding a single poker table—the coveted final table—surrounded by a few rows of black bleachers on two sides. The bulk of the room is filled with around 100 oval poker tables, neatly lined up in rows. Above each hangs a sign on a string, indicating the table number. The room quickly fills up with people as the clock counts down to the noon start-time.

There are eleven seats at a poker table with one reserved for the dealer, right in the middle of one long side of the oval so that he can reach both ends fairly easily. To the dealer's immediate left is seat one, and then the seats are counted clockwise around the table, ending with seat 10 at the dealer's immediate right. Since I'd been assigned seat 6, I sat across from the dealer on the opposing long side of the oval. When I sat down, the dealer asked to see my receipt to ensure I'd taken the correct seat at the correct table. Only after watching him turn a couple of guys away, sending them to other tables, did I realize how necessary the checking of receipts must be. Meanwhile, the thought crosses my mind that if a few of these dudes can't understand at which table they are supposed to sit, they likely can't understand how strong or weak their poker hand is either.

## Chapter 7

### The Rules of Poker

No Limit Texas Hold'em has become the standard variation of poker since it rose to popularity some 45 years ago. Hold'em has been the format of the World Series of Poker's main event ever since the WSOP's second year in 1971. I don't remember when I was introduced to the game myself, but I do remember watching with clueless fascination as Matt Damon and Edward Norton's characters in *Rounders* played the game. The movie hit theaters when I was 16, but I think I must've caught it the next year when it came out on video. It was probably another year after that, when I was 18, that I started playing the game and developing an understanding of something that has ever since occupied a significant portion of my brain and many hours of my life.

If you're already familiar with No Limit Texas Hold'em, feel free to skip this chapter, but if you've never played or need a refresher, I'm going to do my best to explain the fundamentals here.

Hold'em uses a standard deck of 52 playing cards, four suits of thirteen cards each—spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs. The ultimate goal is to have the highest five-card hand at the table, which is rewarded with the pot. The ranking of hands, from highest to lowest are as follows, and the probabilities I refer to are only for Hold'em:

- ♠ Straight-Flush —This hand requires all five cards to be in consecutive order and of the same suit. Example: Jack, 10, 9, 8, 7, all of hearts. When people talk about having a Royal Flush, they're talking about the highest possible straight-flush, Ace-through-10, all of the same suit. The probability of being dealt a straight-flush in any given hand is approximately 0.0311%.
- ♠ Four of a Kind —Commonly referred to as "quads," this poker hand requires a player to have all four cards of one value. Even though poker hands require five cards, the fifth card in a hand valued at four of a kind is irrelevant. Example: 7 of spades, 7 of hearts, 7 of diamonds, 7 of clubs, Jack of diamonds. The probability of being dealt a four of a kind in any given hand is approximately 0.168%.
- ♠ Full House —Commonly referred to as a "boat," this hand requires a player to have three of a kind and a pair. Example: 4 of spades, 4 of diamonds, 4 of clubs, 9 of spades, 9 of clubs. The probability of being dealt a full house in any given hand is approximately 2.6%.
- ♠ Flush —This hand requires that all five cards must be of the same suit, however they may be in any order. Example: King of spades, 10 of spades, 5 of spades, 3 of spades, 2 of spades. The probability of being dealt a flush in any given hand is approximately 3.03%.
- ♠ Straight —This hand requires that all five cards must be in consecutive order, however they aren't required to be of the same suit. Example: Queen of spades, Jack of hearts, 10 of diamonds, 9 of hearts, 8 of clubs. The

probability of being dealt a straight in any given hand is approximately 4.62%.

- ♠ Three of a Kind —Commonly referred to as a "set" or "trips," this hand requires that three cards must be of the same value, the other two required cards of this five-card hand are irrelevant. Example: 8 of spades, 8 of hearts, 8 of diamonds, Ace of diamonds, Queen of spades. The probability of being dealt a three of a kind in any given hand is approximately 4.83%.
- ♠ Two Pair —This hand requires that two cards must be equal in rank, plus two more cards must be equal in rank, but not equal to the first pair. The fifth card is not required to match anything. Example: King of diamonds, King of spades, 8 of diamonds, 8 of clubs, Jack of hearts. The probability of being dealt a two pair in any given hand is approximately 23.5%.
- ♠ One Pair —This hand requires that two cards must be equal in rank. The remaining three cards have no requirement. Example: Ace of spades, Ace of hearts, 9 of hearts, 5 of diamonds, 3 of diamonds. The probability of being dealt one pair in any given hand is approximately 43.8%. In Texas Hold'em, it is more likely than not that each player will be dealt at least a pair in every hand.
- ♠ High Card —This hand has no specific requirements and is essentially a "no-hand" hand. Example: King of clubs, Jack of diamonds, 8 of hearts, 7 of diamonds, 2 of diamonds. The probability of being dealt "no-hand" in any given hand is approximately 17.4%.

Of course, it's not uncommon for multiple players to have a hand ranked in the same category as one another. For example, I might be holding a straight in seat six while the guy in seat three also has a straight. The fallback in that case, as it is in all cases, is to go to the high card. If my straight peaks at a Jack—7, 8, 9, 10, Jack—and his peaks at a King—9, 10, Jack, Queen, King—then he wins because his straight is higher. The same goes for flushes—a flush to the Ace beats a flush to the King. If there are two flushes to the same high card, then it goes to the second-highest card—a flush to the Ace-Jack beats a flush to the Ace-Nine. Two pairs are ranked on their highest pair first and use the second pair only to break the tie—two pair with 10s and 2s beats two pair with 9s and 8s, two pair with 10s and 2s loses to two pair with 10s and 4s. Should two people have the same two pair, the tie is broken by the fifth card—10s and 2s with an 8 beats 10s and 2s with a 4. The same goes for breaking the tie of one pair—a pair of 10s with an Ace beats a pair of 10s with a Jack. Whenever there is a tie, you go to the high card, and if that's a tie, the second highest card, and so on until you have used all five cards in your hand. If a tie still remains after that, the pot is split between the tying players.

Even though you may only use five cards to make your best poker hand, Hold'em gives you seven cards to choose from. Five of the cards at your disposal are community cards, meaning that every player at the table has access to use the exact same cards, face-up, in the middle of the table. In theory, everyone at the table could use those same cards to have the same five-card poker hand and therefore split the pot ten ways, which would be a refund of all the money put into the pot back to its original owners.

There are two major aspects to Texas Hold'em that complicate the game, which is to say, make it interesting. First, while all players share five cards, each player also starts out with two

cards of his own, which remain hidden from the other players. Those two cards—called "hole" or "pocket" cards—are unique to him and therefore make a player's five-card poker hand more or less valuable than his opponents' hole cards make his hand. The other major aspect is the betting structure. There are four rounds of betting in a single hand of hold'em, which is enough to allow for strategy.

At the beginning of the first hand, a dealer position is determined with a high card. Even though a professional dealer deals the cards, a player holds the dealer button, meaning the dealer starts dealing to the person to the immediate left of the dealer button, who is in the small blind. Blinds are forced bets. There is typically a small blind—to the left of the dealer—and a big blind—to the left of the small blind. Clockwise from there, each player has the option to fold his cards, call the big blind, or raise the bet. After the action goes around to everyone and they've folded, bet or called, the first three of the five community cards are dealt—called "the flop." The flop can make a couple of bad hole cards good ones or a couple of good hole cards bad ones. The trick is to push out someone with bad cards before they become good cards. Hang out in the poker room at a casino and you'll see a player kicking himself for the hole cards he threw away before the flop. Once the flop comes out, though, and he sees that he hit his two pair or three of kind, he'll be missing those hole cards as if they were a couple of Sandy Koufax and Hank Aaron rookie cards his brother trashed a while back when he was cleaning out the closet.

After the flop comes out, there's another round of betting. Players do their best to convince other players they've got the best hand. Someone will bet at it, a few players will fold, but someone will call, or maybe raise. Egos will be tested until everyone has folded but one player, who is awarded the pot. If more than one person is still in the hand after the round of

betting, another community card is dealt—this one called "the turn" or "fourth street," followed by another round of betting.

The final card—"the river" or "fifth street"—is dealt for the remaining players to use, followed by a final round of betting. If more than one person is still in the hand at the end of this round, the cards are turned over and a winner is declared based on who has the highest ranking hand. That person is awarded the pot, the dealer button is rotated one spot to the left, which forces the blinds also one spot to the left, the cards are shuffled and another hand is played. In a cash game, players are free to sit as long as they've got money, and they may also leave at any time. In a tournament, a player may sit as long as he has tournament chips in front of him, but when they are gone, he is done. The tournament lasts until one person has won everyone else's tournament chips.

## Chapter 8

### Chip and a Chair (Well Played)

My shaky nerves kept me from playing anything but premium hands—Ace-King, Ace-Queen, pocket pairs. If anyone made a decent-sized raise, I threw away my cards unless I was absolutely confident I had the other person beat. I won small pots here and there and watched as impatient egos pushed their chips into the middle to do battle with one another. Under the idea that folding was free, I did my best to stay out of the way of anyone on a mission to go all-in. I never chased anyone else into the middle, and when I went into the middle first, I did my best to make that player realize he was putting himself at risk to follow me.

When the dealer passed me a pair of pocket Kings, I made large raise before the flop and got one caller. I guessed the caller had an Ace with a large kicker. (A kicker is just slang for the other card. An Ace with a decent-sized kicker means an Ace with another high card.) When the flop came out Jack of hearts, 9 of spades, 3 of diamonds, I surveyed my position. In poker, people tend to rely too much on what they've got—if you see someone win a hand with two pair, it doesn't mean that your two pair will win when you have it. My pair of Kings was good, but I needed to think about what I could be up against. Remember, I guessed that my opponent had an Ace with a high kicker. Since no Ace came out on the flop, if indeed I'd guessed my opponent's hand correctly, then he could have at best paired his kicker. Maybe he had an Ace-Jack, and following the flop he now had a pair of Jacks. Or maybe he paired his Ace-9. I don't think he

would've called my large raise before the flop with an Ace-3. None of these three pairs would be enough to beat my pair of Kings, though.

There was one other somewhat likely scenario—he might have flopped a set. Possibly he called my large pre-flop raise with a pocket pair of 3s, but it would be much more likely for him to call with a pocket pair of 9s or Jacks. If that's the case, I'm losing the hand. It's unlikely he called my bet with anything that would have flopped a two pair for him—Jack-9, Jack-3, 9-3. He could have a pocket pair of Aces, which would mean I've been behind since the beginning, but if he had Aces, he would've raised my bet pre-flop instead of just calling. There's also a longshot chance he's on a straight-draw. Maybe he's got a King-Queen, meaning that if he caught a 10 on the turn or the river, he'll have a straight and beat me unless I improve my hand.

He checked to me. The amount of chips in the pot was close to the amount he had left in front of him and two-thirds of the remaining chips in front of me. An incremental bet he would have to call if he hit any part of the flop. I felt confident I was ahead with my pair of Kings, but who knew what the turn and river would bring. My only real chance at improving my hand was to catch a third King, which wasn't likely. So I pushed all of my chips in to force him to make a decision. If he called me and lost, he'd be out of the tournament, whereas I wouldn't be out, but my tournament life would be crippled if I lost the hand.

I didn't think he would call, but he didn't hesitate, which made me think he had the set of Jacks or 9s. My stomach dropped. Instead, he threw over his Ace-Jack confidently. He'd probably told himself he had top pair with top kicker. He must have thought I was bluffing with an Ace-King or Ace-Queen. When I showed him my pocket Kings, the hopefulness dropped from his face. I want to say I felt bad for him, but you don't feel bad for people in poker, even

when you kind of do. You especially don't feel bad for people you're in a hand against. After all, this one wasn't over, even though I was winning.

There's five of the 45 remaining cards we hadn't seen in the deck that would take the pot away from me and give it to my opponent—that is to say, he has five outs. Some of those cards had been seen by other players, but we didn't know which ones, so for all we knew, all five could be either the turn or the river card. If one of the two remaining cards is a Jack, it'll give him three of a kind, which beats my pair. If one of the three remaining Aces comes out, he'll have two pair, which also beats my one pair. With his tournament life at stake, my opponent stood up from his chair and watched the dealer lay out the turn card.

In fact, he tried to will the deck as he shouted "Ace!" at just the moment the dealer flipped the card over. The other players at the table groaned sympathetically at the King placed on the felt. I worried so much about the 20% chance an Ace or a Jack would hit the board that I forgot I could improve my hand, which the King on the turn had done. I now had a set of Kings, and no other card could be dealt that would cause me to lose. The river was irrelevant, but the dealer dealt it out anyway as the guy who thought his top pair might win something walked away from the table, out of chips, out of the tournament.

"Nice hand," someone at the table said to me. Everyone always says that. Players are always saying "Nice hand" or "Well played" or "Nice bet" when you win a pot. Their tone implies that you handled the situation exactly as they would have, had they been given the opportunity. It's all bullshit. A way to pass the time until one of you will fall victim to the other, forgetting that pretend respect was paid only a few hands before.

"Thanks." I stacked my new chips on the felt in front of me like the towers of confidence I stacked in my once-anxious chest. In fact, my confidence may have been stacked a little too

high. For whatever reason, when I looked down at a King-7 off-suit (meaning of different suits and therefore less likely to amount to a flush), I felt compelled to bet it. I bet it big and got one caller, just like when I had the Kings earlier. And again, because he called such a large bet pre-flop, I guessed he had an Ace with a high kicker or a pocket pair. I was probably behind with my King-7 off.

The flop wasn't good for me—Ace of clubs, 7 of hearts, 5 of hearts—but with the hand I was holding, the flop wasn't supposed to be good for me. I regretted being in the hand, and I regretted putting any of my chips into the pot. I'd paired my 7, but I knew he could beat that because he'd probably paired his Ace. He checked to me and I checked, too. He knew he was ahead at that point. All I could do was hope I caught something on the turn and then wait for him to bet at me. When he did, I'd have to fold if my hand didn't improve. Jack of hearts on the turn. He bet. I did something stupid.

"All-in," I announced. I'd like to say I don't know what came over me, because I knew I made a mistake, as soon as I said it, but I know what my strategy was. Three hearts on the board meant someone could have a flush. I felt pretty sure my opponent had that Ace, which was good enough to beat me. If he had a Queen kicker, I only had an 18% chance of coming back to win the hand. If he had a King kicker, which eliminated my chances of getting a two pair—since I also had a King—I only had an 8% chance of winning the hand. Of course, I wasn't practiced enough at the time to know what the exact percentages were, but I knew I was in bad shape. If he had a pocket pair above my 7, I was in just as bad a shape, if not worse. My only chance to win the hand was for him to fold his cards. I shouldn't have put all my chips at risk, but it worked—he folded.

With a new appreciation for the chips in front of me, the ones I could've, and should've, lost, I kept quiet for a while. Players are scared of the man at the table with the most chips because the chip leader could put them out, but the chip leader also has a target on him. I wasn't the chip leader at the table, but I had a target on me from my all-in move with King-7. A few of the guys at the table speculated about what I might have had. No one thought I was bluffing except the only person who could have called me and didn't. Folding that hand haunted him until he was in the same position again with someone else. He felt sure that I had bluffed him out of that pot, he didn't hesitate with the other guy, and called his all-in right away. Unfortunately for him, this time his opponent had something.

For hours I lay low—betting hard when I had something good, forcing everyone else out of the pot, but folding quickly at the first sign of danger. Steadily I watched the number on the screen drop, the number of players remaining in the tournament. We'd played poker all day since noon, trying to pare down the field from the initial 544, all of whom paid the \$550 entry fee, to just the 10 who would earn a seat at the coveted final table. The tournament director, a young, dark-haired guy by the name of Johnny Grooms said we'd play either until the final ten players had been determined or 2am, whichever came first. Thirteen of us stopped after playing for 14 hours.

Driving back to Laura's by myself in the middle of the night, I was thrilled. When I'd come to the casino, I felt so unsure of myself and my ability to play poker outside of a home game, like I had no business being in the tournament in the first place. Like I was going to be disqualified for my lack of understanding of poker etiquette or nuanced rules or discourse. Leaving, I felt like a veteran to whom others should look up to and imitate. Even if I came back to the casino the next day and lost before any of the remaining players, we'd reached the pay

bubble and I was guaranteed a few thousand dollars. I sneaked into Laura's house in Midtown Memphis around 3am and I wrote her a note telling her I'd survived the first day, and then I went to bed, exhausted, but giddy with excitement.

When I woke up around noon. My face felt heavy the way sleeping too little or too much tends to make it. I showered before starting the drive back to Tunica. The note I'd left my sister the night before, explaining the situation, was gone, and she'd replaced it with her own, wishing me luck and telling me I was welcome to the leftovers in the fridge. I'm not superstitious, but I passed on the leftovers in order to head to the casino's sports bar and eat the exact same meal I'd eaten the day before—A club sandwich and two bloody marys—on the off chance that it had been a lucky combination.

Afterward, back in the tournament room, a few people were scattered in the bleachers surrounding the table on the stage, the final table, the one I was so close to being a part of. A couple of dealers were moving cards around, for what purpose, I had no idea, but it looked official. The tournament director pointed me to the final table and said seven of us would play there and six would play at another table until only ten remained, at which point we'd take a break and consolidate. It occurred to me that I was barely awake, a little bit buzzed from the bloody marys, and I was about to be playing in the biggest poker game of my life—the winner to be awarded a gold ring and just over \$79,000. There is no warm-up period like there is in athletic events, there's no easing into the really cold pool with poker, there is only jumping off the diving board and having to adjust to the temperature of the water. The idea of playing 14 hours the day before and then possibly making a mistake the following day that could've put me out in the first few hands made me nervous.

Once we all took our seats, the chips we finished with the day before were placed in front of us. At that point, the goal became to survive until the final table. I had no plans to make a run at collecting more chips. I just didn't want to lose the ones I already had. My plan worked and with 11 players left, two people got knocked out at the same time. Johnny consolidated us into one table of nine. He put biography cards in front of us—standard stuff: name, hometown, occupation, years of playing the game, greatest poker accomplishment. I decided I'd been playing poker, or at least Texas Hold'em, for a couple of years at that point. I'd made over \$3,000 playing in an online tournament a few months before, but I never cashed it out, so it didn't feel real. I lost the money slowly, nothing fast enough to get my attention, so I settled on a lie as my greatest poker accomplishment—second place in the Little Rock Strip Poker Invitational, a fictional tournament a city in the Bible Belt would never actually host. In the future, though, I knew *this* tournament would be listed as my greatest accomplishment.

We'd studied each others' faces and movements for two days. We knew each other in ways that our significant others didn't. In life, friends assume we're always telling the truth, and maybe each of us is, but there at the poker table, we all assumed each of us was lying a decent percentage of the time. We talked like friends, through smiles and witty banter, but inside we wished the worst for each other. We hoped there was a dogfight between two of the other assholes that sent one of them home. But hearing Johnny read the player bios to those in the bleachers did something to the mood at the table. For just a minute, everyone at the table became actual friends. If not friends, then at least people who felt the bond of having accomplished something together. We had all done our part to get rid of the other 535 entrants so that we might share what remained of the prize money. For a moment, we were just a bunch of guys who liked playing poker. An engineering tech from Memphis, a Texas rancher, a realtor from Georgia, a

student from small town Arkansas. I looked up to the bleachers where my sister sat talking to someone I recognized as having played in the tournament, someone who wanted to be sitting where I sat now. Laura had taken the afternoon off to come watch me play, to come see what I'd accomplished.

I started the final table in eighth place with \$61,000 in chips, and if I finished eighth, I'd leave with \$7,915 in cash, which was \$2,500 more than I was guaranteed with tenth, and I'd be happy with that. I vowed to fold everything until the short stack, the person with the least amount of chips, had been eliminated. Terry, this parks and rec director from Kansas City, pushed all-in with his \$21,000 in chips and got a call. He had pocket queens, but when the other guy got his ace on the flop, Terry was cooked. And just like that I locked in another \$2,500. We all congratulated him and shook his hand, but inside we all congratulated ourselves. Even though I'd locked in the nearly \$8,000 I'd initially said I'd be content with, it's only natural to hope for something better than what is guaranteed. I set my sights on outlasting another player in order to finish in seventh place, worth \$10,555. The whole poker tournament experience would be easier to explain if I could just tell people "I won ten grand." It had a nice ring to it.

Joshua, a poker pro from St. Louis, on the other end of the table moved all-in and Jason from Ocean Springs, Mississippi called him. Joshua's pocket tens were a slight favorite over Jason's Ace-King off-suit—the classic duel. Jason missed, glanced at their chip stacks and walked away after deciding Joshua had enough chips to knock him out. Another one down. Ten grand. Jason went to sign for his \$7,915. The dealer, just to be safe, counted down Jason's chips and matched them up against Joshua's. Jason had one \$500 chip remaining—just enough for the ante. Johnny used the microphone to call him back over and told him he had one more shot. It

was nothing, though. He didn't stand a chance with his one purple chip, valued at the smallest denomination still in play.

Jason looked like a little kid being told he had to participate when he'd already made up his mind that he didn't want to. He didn't even sit down all the way because that's how quickly he was supposed to lose. He leaned on a knee placed in the seat, held his backpack on one shoulder, eager to walk away a comparative loser. Everyone else tossed around the phrase "Chip and a chair," which embodied poker marketing. The idea being that anyone with a chip in front of him had a shot at glory, at winning the big prize. When it's just one chip, though, Jason's got no play. One chip doesn't give him any room for strategy. At that point, he is completely dependent upon luck.

And luck showed up. Taking Jason's chip was a formality for the rest of us, and for him, too. No one thought he would turn one chip into ten, but he flopped a full house—a boat—and his \$500 became \$5,000, which was just enough to cover his big blind the next hand. That one should've done him in, too, but it didn't. He paired a ten on the river. The next hand, he stole the big blind, meaning he went all-in in the hopes that everyone would just fold around to him and he would win the small and big blinds, plus the antes. And when he stole the blinds two of the next three hands, he had over \$50,000 in chips—he had more than I did. Jason finally took off his backpack, he slid down into his seat, and I lost the ten grand I thought I had locked. Chip and a fucking chair.

Everyone watched my short stack. After what we'd all just witnessed with Jason, I knew my opponents wouldn't let me get away with stealing blinds, but I didn't have any other option. When I caught an Ace-Ten, I went for it—all-in. Everyone folded around to Joshua, who appeared to be thinking long and hard.

"You did this to me yesterday," he said. I'd forgotten, but he was right. I got short-stacked just before we stopped playing for the night and I stole blinds to rebuild my stack. Everyone wanted to be able to say he'd made the final table, so no one was eager to fold. I used their conservative play against them.

"I can't let you do it again," Joshua said. Because of his reluctance, I thought my Ace-Ten might be good, but then he revealed a dominating Ace-Jack. Another Jack came on the flop and I knew my fate. Jason, whom everyone thought would be knocked out in eighth place, kept his seat while I walked with what should've been his \$7,915. Instead, he used his chip and a chair to keep his seat long enough to take second place, worth \$42,480.

There could have been a better result for me, but it's hard to complain about not winning \$10,000 when I did get to walk with \$8,000 of it. So it was with a good attitude that I went back to my \$50/week job. After picking Ray up Monday morning to make our sales calls, we made a quick stop at the bank. I stood in line at the dark-haired woman's window and then slid her nearly \$8,000 cash under my deposit slip. She recognized me from my withdrawal on Friday.

"How was your weekend?" she asked.

## Chapter 9

### Back to Tunica

After putting in another week of work driving Ray around town, and reading books in hospital waiting rooms, I stopped by the bank again to make another withdrawal. My teller raised an eyebrow of curiosity when I slid the banking slip to her requesting a large amount—\$2,100 for another tournament in Tunica—but she didn't ask any questions as she counted out the hundred-dollar bills in front of me. The tournament stakes got higher as time inched toward the end of the circuit event, which concluded with a \$10,000 buy-in I had no intention of participating in. Again, on my way to Laura's for the night with an envelope full of cash, I had to wonder if chasing my poker player hopes was worth risking two grand. I justified the risk by reminding myself I now played with house-money, money I wouldn't have without poker. Even if I lost this tournament, I had the thrill of making the final table the weekend before, and even after losing the \$2,000 entry, plus the \$80 entry fee, I'd still profit nearly \$6,000. It was worth it.

The next morning I went over early to give myself enough time to reacclimate myself. I sidled up to the bar at Replays and put a club sandwich in my gut, a bloody mary in my veins. The lump of folded cash gave off an imagined cool burn inside my pocket like rubbing alcohol on skin as I made my way to the tournament registration desk.

Chris Moneymaker.

Right before I got to the desk. The man who won the World Series of Poker bracelet two years before stood talking to a couple of guys just outside the tournament room. And in an

instant, I became of the intricacies of my central nervous system. No matter that he was the no-namer who pulled off the big one a couple of years earlier sparking the overwhelming interest in the game, he didn't feel like a no-namer anymore. He wasn't a no-namer. He had been one at the time, but now he was on TV all the time, mentioned even when he wasn't one of the players at the table; people knew his name now, those dudes watching poker at bars reference him every few minutes. I gave him a silent head nod of acknowledgment, received one from him, and I went to take my seat.

It felt good to be back, sitting there in a room full of clacking chips, thriving egos. I played my same strategy that I'd used in the last tournament—I folded a lot. And just like in the last tournament, people dropped out steadily. During those years following Moneymaker's WSOP victory, tournament tables filled with what poker players refer to as dead money. To say that someone is dead money in a tournament is to say he has no shot at winning because he lacks the skills needed to make it happen, though the only thing that prevents him from winning is that lack of skill—he can still technically win. If a thousand people pay \$2,000 to enter a tournament, the money paid by someone who has no real skill, is simply bonus money contributed to the overall prize pool.

Yes, Moneymaker showed the world that anyone has a shot at winning the big one, but that doesn't mean that Moneymaker bought a seat and then sat back and waited for his two-and-a-half-million-dollar cards to come. It still took a tremendous amount of skill for him to take it down. A surprising number of players think that learning what good cards are means you know how to play the game. When people learn to play poker, they are eager to get in the game (and most likely, so is the teacher), so a player picks up just enough protocol to play, but not enough to win consistently.

Pocket Aces, that's the best hand to start out with. When people get them, they feel invincible, but the truth is, just because your starting hand is better than everyone else's, it doesn't mean you're going to win. For example, let's say you're starting with the pair of Aces, you raise the bet, and everyone folds but one idiot who has no idea what he's doing. In fact, he's stayed in with 7-2 off-suit, which is generally accepted as the worst hand to start with it. He's got the worst hand, you've got the best hand, so you should be good, right? Most of the time, yeah, you're good, but just under 13% of the time, you'll lose with pocket Aces to the worst starting hand out there. And those are the extremes. Add another couple of players to the hand and you're probably sitting around 50% to win the hand, and no one at the poker table wants to be flipping a coin for his tournament life.

I'd made a final table a week before, but there was no one in that tournament I recognized from TV. In this \$2,000 tournament, Moneymaker stood on the sidelines, which told me that if he was here, so were a lot of other guys I'd never heard of, but who were probably still good enough to be traveling the circuits, showing up in time to play the main circuit tournament. I was nervous, again.

I didn't listen to music through headphones while sitting at the table like most the others did. I didn't read. I didn't zone out. I mostly just watched the game—the cards being dealt, the players making bets, making judgments about everyone else's play, which poker players love to do. Rarely did I ever engage in much conversation at the tables, but when a guy sitting a couple of seats to my right fielded a couple of questions about writing—I majored in writing in college—I perked up and waited for an opportunity to ask him what kind of writing he did. No sooner had I finally asked him about his writing before he raised the blinds. Everyone else folded around to me, so I called.

"I write a column," he got out before the flop was dealt and we both felt the need to stop talking as friends.

I don't remember exactly how the hand went, but I do remember that I put a large dent in his chip-stack. Large enough that I felt like asking him any more personal questions might be rude, so I didn't. I'd pissed him off, I knew that. He got knocked out of the tournament a few hands later.

"That was Chip Jett," another guy at the table said.

I didn't recognize the name.

"He writes a column for *Card Player Magazine*. About poker," the guy said, seemingly a little frustrated with me.

"No kidding?"

Multiple head-nods confirmed.

That's when the confidence set in. A large amount of the tournament chips in front of me had belonged to Chip Jett not long before. And although I didn't know who Chip Jett was at the time, enough people, not to mention a trade magazine, saw him as knowledgeable enough about the game to give him a column. I decided if I could take his chips, I could take the chips sitting in front of anyone else at the table, too.

And I did. By the time the tournament staff came around to hand out buffet coupons to use during the dinner break, I'd amassed enough chips to allow myself to play it safe and fold for a while. I loaded up at the buffet, ignored the fact that the Sklar Brothers, twin hosts of a comedy sports show on ESPN, sat eating at the next table, and I made my rule—fold any hand that wasn't an Ace and a Face or a pocket pair. But even then, if someone made a significant raise at me, I didn't hesitate to fold an Ace-Queen, or a pair of 10s. Ace-Queen versus that worst of hands, 7-2,

is only a 67% favorite. Since I already had enough chips to survive a while, then why should I even risk them? Playing tournament poker well is about understanding that when the good cards show up, you don't always have to use them. A tournament is more about survival than it is about trying to gather up all of the chips as fast as you can.

When the tournament stopped for the day around 2am again, I'd survived. I drove to Laura's to crash with the knowledge that I'd come back the next day to play the final table, worth at least \$8,000, as much as I'd already won in the \$500 tournament the weekend before. First place paid \$131,000, but I didn't think about that. I still concentrated on survival. If I could outlast one person, I'd go home with \$12,000 instead of eight. That was the goal—to wait out one player at a time, to inch my way up the pay scale.

Laura and her husband Chris met me at the casino that day, and they watched me outlast three players at the final table where I took 6th place. Flanked by men in suits, the cashier counted and recounted a stack of Benjamin Franklins that amounted to \$19,885. Someone waiting in line behind me said to the rest of the line, "He hit *something*." I put the money into the black backpack I'd bought secondhand for three dollars, and then I walked with Laura and Chris out of the casino as coolly as I could. If they hadn't been there, I would've run to Ray's black Cougar, but instead, I held in my true excitement until I got in the car. On the two-and-a-half-hour drive home, I sang loudly to every song that came on the radio, even if I didn't know the lyrics. I knew then that there was no turning my back on gambling. My blood had been contaminated with easy money.

There were people live-blogging that poker event. ESPN Radio was there. Someone interviewed me after I made my second final table that week and asked if I planned on joining the WSOP tour. I told him I did without having thought about it, and he finished up the interview

with something like, "We look forward to seeing you in Biloxi next month." Laura and Chris started making plans to come with me to the Gulf Coast. This was going to be my life, I decided—traveling the country and hanging out on the beach while playing poker. It was going to be good.

## Chapter 10

### A Strategy Revised

Four days after I made my second final table in a week, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. I was on a roll and couldn't wait for the next WSOP circuit event, which was supposed to be in Biloxi, Mississippi, but the casino was destroyed along with the lives of so many. I should've given that \$28,000 to relief efforts and then gotten on with my life. It would've done a hell of a lot more good.

With Biloxi out, I made plans to go to the next event to play poker, but that wasn't until late October, in Indiana. In the meantime, I needed to flex my new-found poker muscle. I started playing pretty heavily online, buying into cash games for two hundred or three hundred dollars at a time. I did pretty well, but I didn't know how to walk away, and there's no way for a player to win if he never walks away from the table. I was constantly moving money from my savings account to my checking account to pay off my credit card, a couple of thousand dollars a pop. By the time the WSOP event in Indiana came around, all of my friends knew that I had won the \$28,000 and they treated me a little like a celebrity. They weren't fainting in my presence or anything, but there was a noticeable difference in how they acted around me. They expected me to buy a round of drinks for people, and if someone didn't know me, my friends made sure to tell them about my poker winnings in front of me.

I could no longer just walk into a home poker game like it was nothing. If I had a hand, those players who didn't play much would be intimidated and fold, even if they had something worth playing out. And those players who fancied themselves pretty good at the game, they

stayed in with hands they shouldn't have just to prove to everyone else that they could beat me. My closest friends didn't change, though—not my cousins Wig or Chlope or two other guys I played with on a regular basis, Bone and Bear. Those guys knew it could've happened to any one of us—it was just a little knowledge of the game and a lot of luck. I'm not sure I recognized that yet, though. Being around all the other guys I played with less often made me feel like I couldn't lose. Like I was going to have this steady stream of income for the rest of my life. And so it was with a lot of confidence that I met a girl named Ashley, paid her way to come to the Indiana tournament with me, and then I withdrew \$6,000 worth of ammunition from my bank account.

The bad news? Ashley was only 20 and therefore couldn't get into the casino. So I set us up in a hotel a few miles down the road, but it bothered me that she couldn't come inside to at least be within eye-shot. When I'd made the final tables at the previous events, I'd had to put in 14-15 hours of concentrated play. That was a long time to just be sitting around a hotel room and I felt bad for her. But more importantly, it was also a long time to be separated from an attractive 20-year-old whom I'd spent a solid two weeks trying convincing—rather successfully, I thought—that I was a general badass. I didn't have the patience for poker in those circumstances. I'd planned to play three tournaments while in Indiana, and so on the first day, I wasn't too worried about losing because I could just win some money in the next two tournaments. I thought I could bust out quickly and then spend the day with Ashley. So I played recklessly and got knocked out in the first hour—\$1,500 gone and I was excited about simply being allowed to go back to the hotel.

The next day, I did the same thing—\$2,000 more gone in just over an hour. With my \$2,500 remaining dollars, I decided I didn't even want to come back and play my third tournament, but as long as I had the money, I needed to come back. After all, I was there

specifically to play those tournaments. It didn't make a lot of logical sense, I know, but I thought to myself the only way I could be excused from coming back to the casino the next day was to get rid of the \$2,500. Luckily, I found a blackjack table willing to take it, \$500 at a time. I was thrilled to report back to Ashley that I wouldn't be leaving her the next day, but rather we would be going to dinner and a movie. It didn't faze me that I'd willingly blown \$6,000 in 48 hours.

Back home, with a little distance between me and Indiana, I reevaluated my plan. The tour headed to Las Vegas next, and then on to Atlantic City, but even the *names* of those cities looked intimidating on the WSOP website. So, I decided to skip those events and wait until January when the tour was back in Tunica, my home turf of sorts.

In the meantime, I kept buying into online cash games. And I drove to Tunica to play my system, always doubling my bet in an attempt to win \$10 at a time on coin-flip games. One time I was playing the coin-flip at the roulette table, betting black. The ball landed in a red number slot 21 times in a row. The odds of that happening are about 0.000015%, and I was there to not only witness it, but I bet against it. Well, I bet against it for 18 of those times before I ran out of money always trying to double my bet. I could do nothing but stand and watch those final three spins before it went back to black. I never wanted it to come back. I wanted it to hit red forever. Losing 21 times in a row while betting the coin-flip shouldn't happen, but it does. So much so that no one around the wheel even notices. It's not a big deal. The dealer probably sees it all the time, just as he sees that one jackass standing there by himself whispering, "Unbelievable."

I went home and I did what I always do—I revised my strategy. I decided I rode the color out for too long. Of course if I try to make \$10 enough times, eventually I'll get the bad run, no matter how small the percentage is that it will happen. What I needed to do was try to make a lot of money fast, I decided. Instead of betting \$10, then \$20, \$40, \$80, \$160, a vehicle payment, a

rent check, six-month's worth of student loan payments, and so on, I needed to skip straight to the vehicle payment tier. With my original plan, even if I won the first series, I was only winning the \$10 I'd initially bet. If I started at a vehicle payment and only went as high as the student loan payments, I would only have to win once in order to profit enough to justify the trip, and then I could go home. The odds of losing three times in a row are about 10.6%, but if I'm only doing it once, no matter what, I liked my chances.

So I went back to Tunica with \$3,500 cash. The telling thing is that I didn't have to go to the bank to get the money. It was all in my bedroom. Not even collected. There was a grand on my dresser. A few hundred in a pocket of the pants that I wore to a home poker game across town the day before. I had cash everywhere. My roommate was waiting tables for \$2.13 an hour, plus tips. She cringed as she watched me gather up my cash from around the room like it was a collection of dirty socks strewn across my belongings. For all the value I placed on a dollar, it might as well have been a dirty sock. I never equated cash with the things that people bought with it. I never made any large purchases with my money, and very few small ones. Going out and buying a big-screen TV or a car was not a good idea, I knew. But what I didn't know was that it was a better idea than putting it back in the betting circle. Had I gone to the arcade and spent \$3,500 in quarters trying to acquire a high score on Pac-Man, my initials on the screen would've been more to show for myself. I would've had something to look at, at least. After I went to the casino, bet my \$500 on black—lost—bet my \$1,000 on black—lost—and then watched my \$2,000 be raked into the casino's tray when it landed red three times...I had nothing.

When January finally came around, meaning the WSOP tourney, which had launched me into this world of gambling, I couldn't afford the \$300 buy-in to play the cheapest of the tournaments. I was baffled. I kept thinking that surely I had another account with money in it

somewhere. *Didn't I open a CD with the \$6,000 I got when I sold my car last year?* I went to the bank. I asked about the CD. It had been closed a month earlier. I'll be damned if the bastards hadn't forged a perfect signature.

I'd won the \$28,000 in August, and by the time I'd begun gathering up tax documents around February, I realized I'd lost a total of \$55,000 in the five months since. It was a strange feeling, to finally see a concrete number placed on that very short period of my life. I was almost proud. I wanted the number to be higher, for some reason. I felt like I'd been in a car wreck and miraculously walked away. Now that I was safe, though, I wanted to be able to look at the car I'd been driving and see more than just a couple of dents and some chipped paint. I wanted it to scare me. I wanted to see a car so fucked up that I would be too terrified to ever get behind the wheel again.

## Chapter 11

### Sins Forgiven

After I went bust, I went to work helping my great uncle, who had recently retired and found himself always needing to make or paint or repair or replace something around his house. I got my old job back at the mall, folding sweaters for just above minimum wage, barely enough to make one bet at the closest hold'em game around. Not an hour went by that I wasn't aware of that, which was psychologically exhausting and nearly a fatal blow to my work ethic. Luckily, I only had a few months before I graduated from college and took a job teaching at a charter high school in downtown Memphis. My sister's town. That dirty stepping stone to Tunica.

For a while, I was too broke to head to the casinos. I shared a car with my girlfriend at the time, so slipping away without her wasn't really an option either. She didn't much care for gambling, so going to the casino together was also unlikely. The only times I took advantage of my proximity to those riverboat casinos in the middle of the row-cropped Mississippi fields is when someone from Little Rock made the trip and cared enough about me to stop and pick me up on that final leg. Some combination of Wig and Chlope and Bone usually came through every so often. We'd go hit the tables for a few hours—blackjack or roulette or poker. I'd count it as a success to break even and get comped a free buffet, but three or four times out of five, I lost money. I'd lose \$400 on a trip, sometimes more.

Nothing makes you feel more stupid than when you lose money playing a game that is designed to make you lose money (which is to say all of them—every last one of them in the

casino). When you're in a group of three at the casino, two of you will have lost, most likely. It was on one of these occasions that Chlope and Bone and I weaved in and out of the tables at the Horseshoe Casino in Tunica. One of them had registered modest gains, the other modest losses, but I was down an even \$500, already more than I had planned to spend. Continuing to play was not an option. I wanted to leave, but there's an unspoken rule that it's kind of up to the person who's winning to decide when it's a good time to go. All of us know the thrill of winning—it's why we keep coming back—so we know how much smarter the winner feels than the rest of us. He's now become our natural leader. The losers, of course, feel beaten, while the winner is empowered. His opinion matters more because he is wiser because of his winnings.

We walked, directionless through the casino. Bone and Chlope discussed something that I couldn't find much interest in because I was reevaluating my strategy toward gambling, and possibly toward life. I stared at the floor. I thought back to when Laura told me about the designers at her architectural firm, about how casino carpeting was designed specifically to be aesthetically displeasing. The idea if patrons aren't looking at the floor, they'll be lured in by the color and lights of the slot machines. Not me. They may have already gotten my money, but I refused to let them control my eyes. I would not only be strong enough to keep looking at the carpet, but I would find pleasure in the too busy patterns.

By the time I saw the chip, the lines and shapes and colors of the carpet being scanned across my eyes had me almost dizzy. We were just making the turn around the corner of an empty craps table. If we hadn't made a left there, the three of us would've walked right into the cashier's cage, which looks like a mix between a jail cell and a bank tellers' window. My first thought was to not react. I didn't want anyone to know that something out of the ordinary, something people say never happens to them, was about to happen to me. Without saying

anything to my two friends, without breaking my slow stride, I leaned over and picked the chip up without looking at it. I squeezed it—just slightly bigger and heavier than a U.S. half-dollar—tightly in the palm of my hand. My palm began to sweat as I pieced together what had just happened.

"Soooo..." I said aloud to Chlope and Bone, who'd finished their conversation. A minute, maybe two had passed since I'd picked up the chip. I still hadn't opened my hand to examine it.

"When we were walking back there, I found a chip."

"Where?" John feigned interest.

"On the floor, back by the craps tables," I half-turned and gave a head nod to indicate the direction we'd come from.

"I saw you pick something up, but I didn't realize what you were doing. Was it white? Or red?" He emphasized the word in a way that meant I would be lucky had it been a red chip, worth \$5. White, a mere dollar.

"When I picked it up, I was trying to be inconspicuous, so I only got a glance at it," I said. My anxiety level raising at the thought of voicing what color I thought it was. If I told them it was a purple chip—\$500—and then I opened my hand to reveal a red, I'd look foolishly sad, even more pathetic than I currently felt. A beaten man miraculously filled with hope for a few minutes, only to be crushed once again. "I think it was..." I smiled, feeling equal parts ridiculous and hopeful, "...purple."

"So that's like...?"

"Five hundred," I said.

"You're saying you have a chip in your hand that you found on the ground. You haven't looked at it, but you think it could be worth \$500," Chlope said.

"Yes."

"It didn't have to be G," Bone chimed in. "It could have been me. I think I almost stepped on it and I felt like G was doing something sketchy. If you found a purple chip beside my foot, it's going to hurt, G."

We formed a small circle around my hand, outstretched the length of my forearm. I turned my hand over and opened my palm. The exact amount I had lost, the amount that had sent me into reevaluation mode, lay in my hand again. No longer did I feel stupid. The power of money. I was alive again.

"Back from the grave, G," said Chlope.

*"It could've have been me,"* Bone repeated.

Sitting here now, years after the fact, putting it all down on paper, it seems like there should've been a great dilemma. I vaguely recall one of them asking me what I was going to do with it. I had just lost \$500, which was enough to send me into a temporary depression. But then all of my sins were forgiven. Should I learn my lesson and count myself extremely lucky to be able to walk out of the casino with the exact amount of money I came in with? It sounded good, but then there's the other perspective by which to view the situation. I'd come with \$500 and I still (read: once again) had that \$500 in my pocket. It's not like I came to simply enjoy the scenery. I came to make money and maybe have some fun. I probably don't have to tell you, by this point, what I did with it. When the three of us walked out of the casino a couple of hours later, I was down \$500. I don't even remember how I lost it. The thrill of finding that purple chip, though, I haven't lost that.

Maybe that's a way to explain to someone who doesn't understand what gamblers are after. While someone might not be able to comprehend why I would sit down to knowingly play

a game where the odds are stacked against me, everyone knows how wonderful the feeling of finding \$500 would be, even if that someone has never experienced it himself. Finding \$500 feels just like winning \$500 for me. It's free money that comes out of nowhere, just like finding it, except that when I win it, the money also comes with a sense of satisfaction. Winning money at the casino is like pleading your case to the cosmos, hoping that you are the one who deserves to find the bag of money on the street and then having the cosmos agree. Sometimes gambling is about more than the monetary rewards, more than the fun, more than the sense of relaxation of sitting at the tables. Sometimes gambling is about being told that you are a good, smart person deserving of a reward. It just so happens that in our society, such rewards are displayed monetarily.

That's how my life and gambling went for a few years—never really taking a stab at playing poker professionally again, like I did during those few months after I made the two final tables. I worked various jobs and made the trip to the casino whenever anyone suggested that we go. For a while I even made pretty good money working a corporate gig, a steady nine-to-five, but even then, I was eager to ditch the monotony for an occasional roller coaster ride at the tables. I came home once after a few cocktails and planned on going to bed because I had work the next morning. But Bone was over talking to Chlope, who lived with me at the time, and we decided leaving the house at midnight to make the three-hour drive to Tunica was a good idea. I felt terrible that I had to call in sick the next day—it seemed completely irresponsible. It's not like work had sneaked up on me or anything. I just couldn't say no to the temptation of the casino. It

had a power over me. It still does. When I haven't been there in a while, I miss it. I get a feeling like home sickness for it. I'm not addicted.

## Chapter 12

### Someone Else's Money

Nearly five years after Ray hired me to be his driver, he mentioned to me that working for him had previously brought me luck—a reference to winning the \$28,000—and we began working on another business deal. I was once again unemployed and he told me I should try my hand at playing tournament poker again. Of course, I didn't have the initial cash investment an attempt like that required, but Ray thought he could help me out with that.

I knew right away it was a bad idea, but I was broke and feeling useless with no means of employment. I told him I thought it could only end poorly, but that I was also completely open to it. In the five years since I'd walked away from that final table, not a day went by that I didn't relive that feeling of success in my mind. That drive, in Ray's car, from the casino...laughing all the way to the bank, as they say. In that car, I also thought about my future, which involved traveling the country and playing poker, living out of casinos and chasing after prize money. It could've been that way, I think, if I hadn't have half-assed it, trying to keep living at home and satisfying myself with online cash games and living a normal life. You can't be a professional poker player and live a normal life. I don't think I had the guts to admit that back then. Ray was giving me a second chance. So I took it, despite my better judgment.

"Regardless of how this turns out, we'll still be friends. We'll drink beers and laugh about it," he said.

The plan was for Ray to pay my entry fees to three WSOP circuit event tournaments in Tunica. He also gave me money for gas and lunch. He paid the \$60 in room charges that the casino didn't already comp me. In return for his investment, Ray received 30% of my winnings. We agreed that he'd probably be paid 30% of nothing, but he insisted this was still a good idea. I couldn't turn it down.

The Moneymaker Effect had started wearing off a little in the past five years and the WSOP could no longer guarantee a large turnout at their circuit events anymore. They adjusted their tournament buy-ins a little in order to prevent scaring a potential player away. Instead of the \$550 and \$2,080 buy-ins I'd paid before, now I'd be playing in a \$230, a \$230, and a \$340. The fees were higher—around 15% as opposed to the previous standard 10%—and the prizepools lower, but it was still poker, and it was still an opportunity to make a lot of money with only a little.

That week, playing with Ray's money, I spent ten and a half hours playing that first tournament of the week on Monday before I finished 98th out of the initial 573 players. I got decent cards and I played them well. I was never a threat to be busted out early. But after seven hours, the cards went cold and I had to tighten up. I played only three hands in three hours. I couldn't recover after that. I tried to make a move into a three-handed pot when I had the action and Queen-Jack of diamonds on the flop that came 10 of diamonds, 2 of diamonds, 3 of clubs. I pushed all my chips into the pot, hoping the other two players would fold, but I knew if they didn't, I still had a shot to either hit the diamond flush, or maybe I could hit an overpair, catching a Jack or a Queen. Rather than calling, this guy came over the top of me and went all-in himself. He had 10-9 off-suit. The third guy inexplicably called behind him with an Ace-6 off-suit. If the

flush hit, I would've tripled up. Another ten came, giving the guy three of a kind, but no diamond came, and I busted out.

Making a deep run into a poker tournament only to lose before the pay bubble—that point at which everyone still surviving is going to make money—frustrates a player. I took 98th place. I outlasted 475 other players. If I could've outlasted another 35, I would've gotten paid \$434, profiting just over \$200, which isn't a tremendous amount, but it's enough to make it worth a man's time. Ideally, I'd take the \$20,000 first prize, but any profit would've been considered a success. Placing 98th was as good as placing 573rd, financially speaking. And it wouldn't have cost all the time and frustration that sitting at the table brings about. (As if I mind the time I spend at the poker table. As if the frustration doesn't make me feel alive.)

On the shuttle-ride from the casino to the hotel room, I began to feel the pressure of playing with someone else's money. When I'd lost the \$55,000 five years before, it was all my money, so the only person who had to cope with that loss was me. People could tell me I was a dumbass for gambling all that money away, sure, but when it came down to it, no one's finances suffered except for my own, and I knew I probably wasn't a dumbass. Even though it was only \$230, and even though he'd volunteered it to me, I felt I owed Ray a profit.

I replayed the hand in my head, over and over. When I put all my chips into the center, I was in last place with nothing more than a Queen high card, but my hand had a lot of potential. In fact, given all of the possible outcomes of the final two cards, I was at 55% to win the hand. The guy with 10-9 held a 38% and the guy with the Ace held a 7%. While I hoped no one had a pair, I assumed at least one of them did. And while I hoped neither of them would call my bet, I assumed that one of them would. I knew I wouldn't be in the best of spots, but I had to make a move, and really, everything went according to plan. My hand had the most potential.

Unfortunately, that potential was never realized. However, I would make the same move every time, though I know it to be risky. Back on the shuttle, back in my hotel room, I questioned whether it was all right to take a risky move when it was Ray's money on the line.

In the end, I knew the only way to play the game was to play my game. The second a poker player is scared of losing his chips, of losing money, that poker player is finished. People think the trick to winning at poker is to have a better hand than your opponent. Not exactly. The real trick to winning at poker is to make your opponent think you have a better hand. The size of a bet and the precise time when it is made wears an opponent down and creates doubt, which will cause your opponent to fold, thus surrendering the pot to you, regardless of what you actually had. Maybe you have something decent, maybe your opponent has something decent. Maybe you two have the exact same hand. If so, odds are that the winner of the hand will be the person who bets it. It takes a better hand to call a bet than it does to make a bet. Someone scared of losing his investment, plays more passively and will be pushed out of more pots. If I worried too much about losing Ray's money, I would be pushed out of the pot.

The next day I took the shuttle back to the casino, paid my \$230 entry fee, and played aggressively. I had some momentum when the dealer gave me Ace-10 of diamonds. I raised it a little pre-flop and had one caller, who had about as many chips as I did. When the flop came Ace of spades, Ace of hearts, 5 of spades, I didn't think I'd get much out of him, so I bet it small. When he raised me, I put him on a bluff. Sure, he could have a better kicker than me—Ace-King, Ace-Queen, Ace-Jack—but there was only one other ace in the deck and I wasn't buying that he had it. He could have a pocket pair, but that would give him only two-pair, which my three of kind could beat. Unless of course it was a pocket pair of fives, giving him a full house, but that seemed pretty unlikely. With two spades on the board, I guessed he made a soft bluff, meaning

that he didn't have anything, but he was drawing to a potentially good hand, in this case, a flush. I called his raise.

When the turn came a 9 of diamonds, I thought his spade draw wouldn't look nearly as appealing to him. However, he pushed all of his chips into the middle. The dealer counted them. He had just a little more than I did, meaning that if I called and lost, I would be out of the tournament and there would only be one more shot for me to win Ray some money. If I called and won, I would double the amount of chips I had in front of me. And of course, I could always fold, forfeiting the chips I'd already put into the middle.

I studied my opponent. His headphones hanging around his neck. His pissed off gaze. I couldn't tell if he wanted me to call because he had a good hand, or fold because he had no hand. He looked nervous, which would suggest his hand is weak. I called. He had the highly unlikely pocket pair of fives. He probably was nervous. Had I an Ace-9 or Ace-5, my boat would have been bigger. He was still nervous when the river card came. I needed another ace, a 9, or a 10 to win—a 16% chance—but I missed. I left the table, eliminated after only an hour and a half of play.

Before I showed up at the casino, Ray and I had discussed my possibly taking a break during the next day's tournament to get my head on straight if I lost the first two tournaments. Then, I would hit the tournament hard on Thursday. I went back to the room and relaxed. I thought about how I'd handled the tournaments over the previous two days. I probably could've made a better decision with that three of a kind, but really, I would've played it the same way the majority of the time. I had a read on him and I went with my gut, which was wrong, but not too wrong. And with the flush draw the day before, I'd make that move every time. I had no major regrets from my first two days of play, and so after 22.5 hours of thinking about it, I decided I

didn't need the rest on Wednesday. I bought in for the \$340 with Ray's money, and I felt good about it.

Early in the tournament the dealer sent me good starting hands—Ace-Queen, King-Queen, pocket 8s—but the flops never improved them. When I had hearts, the flop showed clubs. When I had a medium pocket pair, the flop provided face-cards. When I had face-cards, the flop brought low pairs. In no time at all, my stack had been chipped away by 25% and I lost confidence in my chances to reach pay dirt.

That's when I looked down to see a pair of Queens in my hand. Exhilarating, no doubt, but with the luck I was having on the flop, I was too scared to bet it. The chipleader at the table had started being a little bit of a bully, though—betting enough to push the rest of us around, stealing our blinds—and that's what he tried to do to me. I could tell he was surprised when I called his pre-flop bet, but he never got nervous. He had twice as many chips as I did, if not three times. I knew what he planned to do. I assumed he thought I had an Ace in my hand. If the flop shows Ace, he might slow down the pace and check the bet to me. Unless he has an Ace, at which point he'll bet strong again and I'll either fold or call with a weak Ace. He knew I was frustrated at my recent sour luck and assumed I was just calling out of frustration as a way to get back at him, he who was having much better luck. What he didn't count on was a flop coming out 4 of spades, Queen of hearts, 2 of diamonds. He knew I wouldn't have made the pre-flop call with a two or a four in my hand. Or even with a pair of either in my hand. At most, he probably thinks I could have an Ace-Queen, but he probably didn't think it was likely, given that he made a bet equal to the amount of all the chips in front of me. Of course I called and showed him my three Queens. Disgusted (at himself, possibly, but probably at the poker gods), he threw his cards into the muck face down.

The dealer sighed before pulling the other player's cards out of the muck and turning them over, a requirement before dealing out the rest of the hand. The bully had a Jack-10 of hearts. He had to pull a runner-runner—meaning he had to hit certain cards on both the turn and the river—to make a straight or runner-runner hearts for his flush to beat me. Both highly improbable, but more unlikely things had happened to me before. However, the 3 of spades came out, which was the best card I could've hoped for on the turn. My pot. I was the new chipleader at the table.

Good cards continued to come my way and I played a lot of hands, but I won enough of them to stay on top for a few hours. When I got dealt an Ace-King, I made a big pre-flop raise. The guy just behind me in chips called. Another player behind him came over the top and went all-in, but it wasn't much more than double my original bet. In order to push the caller out, I put all of my chips in the middle. With one guy all-in, and then me going all-in after that, the only thing the other guy can risk his tournament life with is a pair of Aces, and I was sure he didn't have that when he didn't raise my original bet. Not in a century do I expect the guy to make that call—he absolutely shouldn't—but he does. He shows a pair of tens to the short-stack's Ace-Queen and my Ace-King.

The Tens have the best shot at winning, but at 45%, there's an even better chance that they'll lose. An Ace or a King comes and I'll be ahead. A Queen comes and the short-stack wins a portion of the pot. In reality, none of that came, though, and the short-stack was sent home, while I was left with barely enough to cover the big blind, which it was my turn to do. I called a small raise with my 4-5, but my hand never improved. My week of playing with Ray's money ended, and had produced us no winnings.

When Ray and I had planned our strategy, he told me he didn't want to hear from me until the week was over. While he didn't tell me the reasoning behind that wish, I attributed it to his wanting to avoid the stress of paying attention to an investment as volatile as poker. The time had come to call one of my oldest friends and tell him that I'd lost the \$800 he'd given me to play poker with.

There is this sick feeling a gambler gets when he knows he's lost more than he meant to and he wants nothing more than to be back where he started, before he'd made a single wager. All his problems will be fine if he could just find a chip worth the amount of money he's lost, he naively thinks. He's got to somehow get it all back. Even though it wasn't my money, that's how I felt as I strolled, lonely, out the front door and onto the walkway leading off of the giant barge that is the casino. I leaned over the rail and looked down on the stagnant river water between the barge and the rocky shore—that man-made moat. I thought about how I would tell him I lost, how I could break it to him the easiest. Because he hadn't heard a thing from me, I wondered if he secretly hoped I was off winning him mounds of cash. Of course he did. If he wasn't hoping that, we wouldn't have embarked on this endeavor in the first place. Just like me, he'd want to go back to the beginning and give up his chance at big money in exchange for the \$800 he started with. Not to mention the other \$210 he'd given me for gas and food and the hotel room, which I had for another couple of nights.

I was broke. I had no job at all and no prospects of one. I lived with my mother in my high school bedroom. My feelings of self-worth were nearly non-existent already, so the last thing I wanted to do was let down a friend who had faith in me. Not that I was ever a bad friend to anyone that I could think of, but for someone to actually invest money in me at that time in my life...that was some faith. I did a count and realized I had just enough of my own money to get

into the \$340 tournament the next day. In an instant, I hatched a plan to win Ray's money back and I hoped a few bucks for myself. And if I lost, I could at least show Ray that I was willing to put my dollars on the line, too. It was with this enthusiasm that I finally worked up the nerve to call him.

He took it as well as I could've asked for. I did my best to convey to him how bad I felt for losing his money but also assure him I played as well as I could have. He told me not to worry about it, that he knew I did my best, which came with great relief. If nothing else, I wanted him to know I didn't play recklessly with his money.

"Are you headed back?" he asked.

"My niece's first birthday party is tomorrow in Memphis, so I think I'm going to stay long enough to go to that," I said. Not stopping at Laura's for her daughter's birthday on my way out of town seemed ill-advised at the time. Like I said, I was living with my mother and pretending to be working a "business venture" with Ray by spending a week at the casino. To prove that I hadn't lost all my marbles, I had to go to make an appearance at the family get-together. "Since I've already got the room, I might as well. And if I'm going to be here, I think I'm going to play tomorrow's tournament with my own money."

Ray seemed fine with everything when we got off the phone, and I remember thinking how easy it had been to tell him I lost his money. But then I guess it sank in. I got a message from him saying I'd been a bad "employee." When I called him, he didn't answer, but I got multiple messages from him criticizing my decision to play the Wednesday tournament instead of waiting another day, and also criticizing my decision to go to my niece's birthday party. For as long as I could, I chalked it up to him being upset at me for losing his money. That was understandable, but he assured me it had nothing to do with that. Eventually, I lost patience with

his accusations and got angry myself. I decided I would play the tournament and, should I win, not reimburse Ray any of his money.

I did better playing for myself than I did any of the three tournaments for Ray. When I started getting close to making money, though, I got nervous. I was mad at Ray for losing his cool and not trusting me, but I knew I would still feel horrible if I cashed in on the one tournament I played on my own money. Out of principle, though, I wasn't going to change my mind again and reimburse him any of his losses. Being afraid of winning is a bad place to be at the casino. I'm not going to say I lost on purpose—of course not—but however I got knocked out of the tournament, I didn't record it in my journal for some reason. And I've blocked it from my memory, though I do remember losing only a couple of places outside of the pay bubble. And feeling a sense of relief that I made just as much money for myself as I did for Ray—nothing. In the end, I knew Ray—we had been friends for over 20 years—and I would still be his friend, and I didn't want him to feel slighted, should I have done better on my own dime than I did on his.

Over the next few weeks, we went back and forth in messages and e-mails, him claiming I used his money to go on vacation to the casino, me defending my behavior as a responsible gambler. And then finally, after I told him my ideal situation would be to go back and pretend Ray had never sent the first message saying I'd been a bad employee and we could go back to being friends. He told me I could start pretending, and then he blocked me on Facebook, which sounds cheesy, but it's not when you recognize the parallels.

I'd blocked him in the same manner when we were instant messaging each other at 18 years old and he told me he and my girlfriend did something they shouldn't have. I'd joined the Army and was away in Maryland for training, but I blocked communication with them both from that moment on. I didn't speak to my high school girlfriend until a chance meeting five years

later. It's a testament to the friendship Ray and I had that he told me the truth when I asked. And it's for that reason, I showed up at his house when I came home for Christmas with some beers and we laughed it off, but we were kids back then, and adults often forget the importance of forgiveness.

Two years later, at his brother's wedding, I cornered him and wanted him to meet my new girlfriend Liz, but he instantly became fidgety and disappeared to the bathroom to fix the faulty zipper on his pants. Not long after the vows were exchanged, I watched him swipe a couple of beers from the open bar, put them in his pants pockets, and leave hurriedly with his wife. At first I thought it was a trashy move, but then I have to remember fondly the time I was his plus-one at his work Christmas party when he waited tables at this Brazilian place. After everyone was good and drunk and the party started to wind down, he and I smuggled entire unopened bottles of wine to the trunk of my car. We even made off with an industrial-sized tray of stuffed mushrooms. To this day, I can't mix wine and mushrooms. My professor noticed an acidic mixture of both on my shirt when I turned in my final the next morning. Ray and I have a history, and we always will, even if he decides to block me from his life forever. I won't hold it against him, and I certainly won't hold it against gambling.

## Chapter 13

### My Favorite Neighbor

A few years ago, I moved to New Orleans to go back to school. After moving in, I fell asleep on my mattress on the floor and when I woke up, I had a parking ticket because I hadn't moved the truck in over two hours. The next day I blocked off to make sure I acquired a resident parking pass. I buried my nose in my GPS and made my way to the appropriate government building downtown. I imagined DMV-style lines—hours of waiting beside oblivious parents whose sticky-fingered children fingerpainted the walls with their sucker-stained saliva—but when I got there, there was only a small, empty waiting room. The woman behind the counter told me I'd be unable to obtain a residential parking permit for six-months, and she turned me away within 15 minutes of my entering the building.

On my way back to my new apartment, I decided to forgo the GPS as a way of familiarizing myself with the area, an attempt to learn my way around—I didn't think it would be hard. New Orleans is such an attraction for tourists that the city has put up signs with arrows directing people to the French Quarter, St. Charles Avenue, and all of the other things tourists have been told to experience. To get to my apartment, I'd need to cross through the French Quarter, so I followed the signs to do so. That is, until one of the signs said "Casino." Surely not, I thought. Surely I didn't move to a city without being aware that it had its very own casino. And surely I didn't randomly get a roommate who found us an apartment close to that casino. I tried to ignore the signs to the casino because I didn't have any money. I made it back to the apartment

before I pulled out my phone to look up the details of the casino—exactly one mile from my front door to the front door at Harrah's. Given the casino situation, my bank account situation now needed to be assessed. Indeed, my bank account was a *situation*.

I had \$10 in my wallet, though, so I hopped on my bike and went to my sanctuary. That place where I feel at home, no matter where I am. It was just the way I pictured it—lights, bells, stale cigarette smoke, and that hideous carpet. I tried to remember if the graduate program I'd just entered lasted two years or three. How long would I have a valid excuse for living this close to a casino? I couldn't wait to get started—just as soon as that stipend hit, I'd turn myself loose on the place, but for the time being, I found a video poker machine to eat my \$10. I played a few hands, got back to even and stood up from the machine. Mounting an attack wasn't much of an option with only \$10, but I wanted to put my player's card into the system and let those bastards know I was close. That I could be lured with a coupon in the mail.

By the time my student loan came through, that's exactly what they were doing—a coupon a week good for \$10 at nearly any table game and a couple of coupons a month good for a seat at the all-you-can-eat buffet. None of those coupons went to waste while I was in town. I'd walk out of the house, headed for school a little early in order to get some work done before class, but I'd end up being late to class, sometimes with a few extra bucks in my pocket.

Sometimes with a few less. I'd do any homework that didn't require my laptop at the poker table.

"If the professor's taking time to play a hand, I'm guessing he's got something," an opponent announced to the table as he folded his cards.

Because I had work to do, I did play a little more tightly. The book I was reading had to be finished by the next morning, so I didn't have time to play a hand on a hunch. I had to have the goods for it to be worth it to pull myself from the work. And I did my best to make sure

everyone knew that was the case. After people understood I chose my hands carefully, I could get away with a bluff every now and then.

"Can you be a little quicker, I have a book to read," I told a guy once.

He checked.

"All in," I said with nothing. The pot was mine. "Thanks, sorry, it's just that I have to have this read by the morning." Which was true, but it didn't mean I didn't enjoy sitting there, playing cards.

I tried to read at the pai gow tables because it's a slow-paced game, but only about half the dealers allowed me to do that.

"I don't mind, but it's against the house rules," they'd say.

It didn't really bother me to put the book away because I felt like I had a valid excuse. I could read later, but for now I had to just enjoy the game. *It wasn't my fault, Dr. Piano, I tried to read the book, but Scott, my pai gow dealer wouldn't let me. Sorry.*<sup>1</sup>

Pai gow is a slow game, and because of that, the casino's profit isn't as high as something like fast-paced blackjack, therefore, there's only one pai gow table at Harrah's New Orleans (unless you're a high roller), compared to the dozens of blackjack tables. And because there's only one table, people tend to hang on to their seats for hours. And because people hang on to their seats for hours, those six people at the table usually learn something about each other. Throw in the free drinks and sometimes you *really* get to know each other.

Me, though, I'm all business in the casino and don't really want to talk to people. Pai gow is basically just a fancy way to play high card, but there is an option to "play the bonus," which

---

<sup>1</sup> For the record, I read every book Dr. Piano assigned, in its entirety. It was another professor whose assignments I skimmed on.

you can do for as little as a dollar. Everyone plays it, except for me, of course. And people get mad that I don't.

"Just put a dollar on it," they say, "you might win something."

"What if you get that natural seven-card straight-flush?" they ask, dumbfounded by why I would simply choose not to take a chance at getting paid 5,000 to 1.

I usually just shake my head and play dumb, as if I'm just too stupid to even want \$5,000. If I keep getting nagged, and some jackass tells me it's costing me money, I'll voice the actual odds of getting a natural seven-card straight-flush—somewhere around 4.8 million to 1. Nobody at the table wants to hear that. It's bad luck. And it really doesn't even make sense for me to use the odds to defend my not playing the bonus, since the odds are against me even when I'm not playing the bonus. They just aren't nearly as bad. We're all dumbasses for being in the casino in the first place, everyone knows it, and undoubtedly someone in each of our lives is happy to remind us.

After one of these arguments with my table—the five of them telling me I should be playing the bonus, me telling them it was a bad bet—I turned over my next hand and realized I had a decent bonus hand, which is to say I had a fantastic bonus hand. All I could do was laugh and wait for the collective "I told you so." When the dealer turned over my five aces, the table erupted. One guy was livid. He had been the quietest at the table up to that point, and I could tell he'd had enough with me.

"If you would have put one red chip on that," he told me, holding up a \$5 chip between his thumb and forefinger. His tone was nearly identical to my dad's after the fire department flooded my burning car with water and I told him I only had liability insurance. "Good *grief*, Son," my dad had said.

"You would have \$1,250 more sitting in front of you now, if you'd have bet \$5," the stranger told me at the table, "Not betting the bonus is gonna hurt you in the long run."

"Already is," someone behind me chimed in, someone who wasn't even in the game. When our table erupted, people came over to see what the hoopla was all about. After getting the scoop, they continued on, some muttering things to each other like, "That man ain't got no sense," referring to me not betting on my hitting the roughly 137,000-to-1-shot hand. The irony of the whole thing is that my five aces were rare enough that everyone at the table who did play the bonus—everyone but me—got paid \$50 for my getting the hand. They all got paid, but were still pissed.

"Sir, would you like to play the bonus this time?" the dealer asked me in a tone that suggested we all knew that I'd learned my lesson and of course I would be playing the bonus.

"No, thanks," I said, "It's a bad bet."

The woman next to me stood up and left, presumably because she couldn't stand to be seated with such proximity to willful ignorance. Of course, someone was there to quickly take her seat. Out of principle, I waited out all of the other players whom I'd offended by not playing the bonus. I took a satisfaction in being the longest-sitting member of the table. I also outlasted the shift of the dealer, whom I sensed had no real problem with me, but who couldn't help being overtaken by the animosity of the rest of the table.

When the new dealer showed up, he collected the deck of cards left for him in the middle of the felt, he showed his palms to the camera above the table in the habitual way that dealers do and he started to deal.

"Alright, everybody, place your bets."

We all moved chip stacks of varying heights to our respective betting circles.

"Sir, are you not playing the bonus?" the dealer asked with nothing more than pure curiosity.

"No, I'm good."

"Just asking. I didn't want you to forget and then get mad if you hit something you should've gotten paid on."

"At least throw a dollar on it," the guy two spots to my left advised.

## Chapter 14

### Pai Gow John

"I've gotten a royal flush eight times in my lifetime," said the man directly across the pai gow table from me. He had light-colored hair that looked to be thinning some as he hit what appeared to be his mid-forties. Instead of saying he seemed like a happy guy, he was big enough, and red-faced enough, to justify my describing him as a jolly guy. "But I can't ever remember what my other two cards were, though," he said to the dealer, but for the benefit of everyone at the table. And as a weighted aside, "You know how much I drink."

Of course, none of us did know how much he drank, but with a statement like that, we could guess. And that explained the red face. Sure enough, when the cocktail server showed up with a round of complimentary drinks, the man who later introduced himself as John chugged what remained of his Heineken, then without hesitation turned up a double-shot of Crown Royal. As he wiped dribbled whiskey from his lower lip he grabbed a red chip to tip the server, who gave him another fresh Heineken.

I'm not sure if it's casino policy or Louisiana law, but rules forbid any player from having two drinks in front of him at the same time. John's strategy kept him from breaking the rules and also allowed him to take in a lot of alcohol from three different drinking receptacles within a span of no more than 15 seconds. I didn't regularly drink much at the casino, but I appreciated John's performance in that it showed he was a man out to beat the system, much like myself. Not

to mention, from a drinking standpoint, John must've resembled a god to the stereotypical freshman fraternity pledge.

"No, not married," John said as he gave a quarter-turn back to face the table, "I wasn't real good at that."

"What seemed to be the problem?" John and I saw a lot of each other at the pai gow table over time, and I knew he liked telling a story. I learned to not be afraid to ask him about things. Odds are, he already had a story prepared within his comfort zone. Or if he didn't, he could come up with one fairly easily.

"Well, I married her when she was only 15," he said. He knew the reaction this would elicit from a listener and he took an almost undetectable satisfaction as the information ran its course. Almost.

"*Fifteen?*" the man next to me said.

John chugged his beer again, took his shot, tipped the cocktail server \$5 and turned back around without missing a beat. "Yeah, we were *young*."

Maybe it was the booze, but John rarely ever told a story in a straightforward fashion. Hard to follow or not, though, they were always worth sticking with to the end. I had asked him about why his marriage failed and next thing I knew, he'd told me about growing up just behind the stables at Churchill Downs.

"I was hanging out with the jockeys when I was just a kid," he said, "but I'd pick my horse and go up to the window and place my bet myself. Before I could hardly even reach the window."

I thought of my own experiences at the horse track as a child. Every now and again, my family drove the 90 miles or so to Oaklawn Park to watch the horses run and throw a few dollars

around on them. Dad gave Laura and me each a small amount apiece to last us the afternoon. No one under 18 years old can place wagers at the track, but we told Dad what we wanted to bet and he placed them for us. I remember thinking that Dad was great for letting me—a kid— bet the ponies. And he was. It made me feel important and grown up.

My grandfather, a lifelong horseman, took my parents to Oaklawn back when they were high school sweethearts. He stood behind my mother with his hands on her shoulders and he leaned down toward her ear as he directed her to look at the long row of windows waiting to take gamblers' bets. And then he directed her to look at the few windows waiting to pay the winners.

"Now, what does that tell you?" he asked her of the disproportionate amount of windows.

Even though Oaklawn used the same windows for paying and collecting by the time my parents started taking Laura and me to the races, I'm sure they made it known that the majority of betters lost. I understood that, but I didn't focus on it the way most logical people do. Instead, I focused on my understanding that someone *had* to win—not every horse could lose—and I thought it might as well be mine. Very quickly I took to studying the common denominators of the winners. Like calling a five-dollar chip at the casino a "nickel," I liked the jargon associated with the race track, too—win, place, show, daily double, pick six, exacta, trifecta, the two- and three-horse boxed.

I found it all to be so exhilarating that by the time my classmates were talking about taking a cruise over our spring break, senior year, I was more interested in spending the week at the horse track, which is exactly what I did. I got a hotel room down the street from the track and didn't miss a single posttime over the entirety of my spring break. I invested in publications to study the horses running at Oaklawn, as well as those running at various locations around the country I could bet on via simulcast. At the end of the day, following the ten or so races, I'd go

back to the hotel and watch the rebroadcast on the local access channel while studying my *Daily Racing Form* in order to determine where I had gone right and where I had gone wrong. I looked for any indicator that might give me a leg up at the betting window. Had the winning horse been training a lot lately? Was he using Lasix for the first time? Never mind that I wasn't sure what Lasix was exactly, other than something I could use to discern a deviation in the treatment of one particular horse and another.

I think I ended up losing, though not much, during that week I dedicated to learning to properly bet the ponies, but it was worth it. Something about that place, and the people who seemed to feel comfortable there, gave me solace. The old men, alone, with a copy of the *Daily Racing Form* folded up in the back pockets of their blue jeans, a dwindling fold of cash in their hands, and pens behind their ears, while they never lost eye contact with the wall of TVs broadcasting from Colonial Downs, Aqueduct, or Laurel Park. Those men talking under their breaths to no one but the horses that can never hear their encouragement. "*Come on, One,*" the strange man beside me would whisper, "*Get up there, One.*" Maybe the comfort I got from being near those men stemmed from the similarities they had to the men I'd been surrounded by as a kid—barely-getting-by farmers who sang in the church choir and gained respect in their rural volunteer fire department. I respected that down-to-business, get-your-hands-dirty look. These men who came by themselves to the horse track to gamble, these men who hid in the dimly lit simulcast room rather than going outside in the sun to watch the live race not even 50 yards away; these were men to me.

"You ever been to Oaklawn Park?" I asked John, back at the pai gow table. "That's where I grew up going to the track."

John wiped the whiskey from his lower lip and turned back to the table with his fresh Heineken. He addressed my curiosity as if he'd expected it. As if he'd planted my question in the audience to make sure he got to say what he wanted to say. "By that time I'd been training horses for a while. And after my wife and I got married...well, my father-in-law didn't like me very much, so we decided to move to Hot Springs, Arkansas so I could go to work in the stables there at Oaklawn. We rode in a horse trailer all the way from Louisville to Hot Springs—600 miles, and it was freezing back there in that thing."

My girlfriend Liz and I had been dating long distance for a few months before she decided to move down. She left in November from her home in Richmond, Virginia to be with me in New Orleans in time for Thanksgiving. Part of Thanksgiving tradition in New Orleans is to bet the ponies at the Fairgrounds Race Course's opening day.

That's where she met John for the first time. I pointed him out to her when I first noticed him that day. He was by himself a few feet from the betting window, juggling a Heineken in each hand, but still trying to put cash back in his wallet while reading the tickets he'd just bought.

"You need a hand?" I asked him as a greeting.

"Well, I really just..." He started to respond without looking up, again like he'd been anticipating someone talking to him. Like he'd been expecting someone. But using all the conversations I'd had with John as evidence, I knew he was probably alone most of the time. He was a salesman through and through, however, and always ready to engage whomever was willing.

"Hold this," he said, handing me one of his beers. He put his wallet back in his pocket, turned the other bottle up and motioned for Liz and me to follow him. He led us twenty-five paces or so to where two uniformed NOPD officers casually leaned against a wall.

"Now..." John said, eyeballing his wagering tickets directly in front the cops, "you had the three-horse, and you had the one- and two-horse boxed, right?"

The cops both nodded as John handed over a couple of betting tickets to them.

He introduced me to his cop friends as his pai gow buddy, and later he told me his cop friends were the guys who made sure he didn't get a DWI whenever he left the race track. He bought them a lot of wagering tickets, but the investment had paid off quite a few times.

"I've got to get them a couple cokes—what do y'all want?" He said to us.

"You're going to be in line forever," I said. "We'll stand with you." And it's true, the line stretched across the width of the room.

"No, I won't. You like whiskey, don't ya? What about you, Liz, what do you want to drink?"

"Whiskey's good," Liz said.

John's eyes nearly bugged out of his head when he heard her. "That's my kind of woman," he said, partially under his breath to me, but loud enough for Liz to hear. He nudged me with his elbow and nodded his head toward her. Should someone have been watching the scene without the benefit of hearing the audio track, they could've thought John had just whispered to me to check out the chest on that little filly, or something of that ridiculous nature. He'd self-described himself to me as my "perv friend." Indeed, nearly everything he said came out a little bit perverted.

He pulled a pen from his pocket and wrote our drink orders onto a beverage napkin. Ignoring the stares from the people in the pair of long lines, John walked right up to the counter of the bar concessionaire and he slid the napkin to one of the women scurrying around on the other side. In no time at all, John came walking back with two sodas for the cops, and a promise

to return in a moment with our whiskeys. Half the line watched him with an impatient interest, that look on their faces like they'd just discovered the game they'd been playing for half an hour was rigged the whole time.

"Alright, chug-a-lug, let's go watch this race," he said, handing us our whiskeys and pulling a long swig from his beer.

Outside, like a child let out of the classroom at recess, John was free to be loud. He could tell a story at full volume using all the expletives he wanted to. He could tell Liz about all the times his wife used to beat him up for coming home from the casino drunk as a skunk. She'd fuck him up good, but the smile he kept on his face now made it seem like the bruises were worth his getting the story out of it. With the exception of two times, John was always happy when I was around, but even then, the sadness didn't last long.

The first time I ever saw him display a hint of sadness, we were there at the horse track on Thanksgiving. Liz went inside to go to the bathroom and John turned to me.

"You can't let her be a stripper," he said, referencing an earlier conversation the three of us had shared. Liz complained that she couldn't find a job that would pay her what she needed, so she joked about becoming a stripper. We all laughed, but none of us knew each other well enough to be certain it wasn't anything more than a joke.

"I know," I said, "I don't think I could handle it."

John assured me I couldn't. Then he told me about when his ex-wife decided to strip. How it used to keep him up nights, even when she was lying in bed beside him. He couldn't shake the thought of all those men grabbing at what was his. Any inkling at sexual rejection from his wife creating a hurricane of jealousy within him, his worried thoughts that she had left all her

sexual desires out there on the stage for someone else. She craved the attention of strange men, not him. And the drugs made everything worse.

"Once she starts stripping," he said, "it'll all be over. I promise you that."

When I went to the bathroom, I feared John would say something stupid to Liz that might set her off. I hurried every chance I could, but when I found them, I realized I had nothing to fear. Liz is easy to talk to, she has a counselor's ear. Instead of his being disrespectful to Liz or to a random woman as Liz witnessed, I found John confessing to her that he had blood pressure problems and diabetes.

A few months passed after Thanksgiving before I ran into John again, this time back at the pai gow table. Something looked different about him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. When I asked where he'd been, he told me he quit drinking.

"Doctor cut you off?"

"No...well, yes, but that's not why I quit," he said. "I had a good day at the track a while back, and I was drunk enough to think it was a good idea to jump up on this BMW in the parking lot. I danced on the hood of it until the guy who owned it came out there and beat my ass."

"Well, lesson learned," I said.

"I hope so."

John told me it was for the best that he stopped drinking. His daughter had done some time in the penitentiary on a drug charge, but was set to get out soon, and he wanted to sober up so she'd have the support she needed when she moved into his place. He wanted to be a good father and put his daughter back up on her feet. He wanted to make sure his daughter stayed off the drugs. When he was sober, John wasn't quite as loud as his drunken self, but he remained jolly and flirtatious. He was still willing to tell those of us at the pai gow table about how he used

to put his truck in neutral and push it out to the street in the middle of the night so he wouldn't wake up his wife when he sneaked out of the house to go to the casino.

## Chapter 15

### A Common Problem

In New Orleans's central business district, I searched the library for a gambling memoir a friend recommended by two writing professors at the University of Southern Mississippi—brothers named Frederick and Steven Barthelme. The catalog said *Double Down* was in the 600s stack, which was hard to find. A library worker had to direct me to a hidden corner, behind the computer lab—it wasn't well-lighted. As I got closer and closer to the correct call number, I couldn't help but notice the books on the topic of substance abuse. Or, to my book's immediate left was a book about how what seems like love to someone could actually be an unhealthy obsession. To its right: a book on suicide. I'd hoped *Double Down* would be casino war stories—a sprinkling of anecdotes about the times when the brothers took the casino's money mixed in with the times the casino took the brothers'. Perhaps they would go into detail about a jackpot hit, or maybe one of them victoriously doubling a hard-17 against the dealer's shit-card on a hunch. I didn't want to read about some guys who gave up the sport, which is all it could be, in this section of the library. I decided to check the book out anyway.

The Barthelme's make it seem in the book like they've probably given up gambling, but they never come out and say it. And there's something I recognize in the words that tells me I may run into them one day at the casino, sitting there beside John at the pai gow table. They understand something that I understand about gambling. It's something that only a true gambler could ever understand, but that also makes no sense whatsoever, described here in a scene regarding the game of blackjack:

You begin to sense that, for all the mathematics, the calculations, the odds, the multiplying strategies of working the percentages, something else is at work, some loopy otherworldly thing. It seems built into the cards. There comes a point when you begin to think you know the cards before they're dealt. You've made a big bet, you're holding an eighteen and the dealer is showing an eight, and you think you've pushed, you're safe. Then you think, Unless she has an ace. No sooner have you had the second thought than you know she *has* the ace. You wish she didn't, but you know she does. And when she flips her down card there it is, the ace. And you lose again. Then you think that you *caused* her to have the ace by thinking it. (67)

Liz talks to me about ghosts. She talks about the Zodiac, and she had a friend do a tarot card reading on me—or *to* me, or *with* me, whatever it is—and then she worried for the two weeks after because her friend said I'd meet a new love interest. I put no stock in that garbage. But I wonder if because I was so scared of that wheel forever hitting red back when I lost all that money, I caused it to actually do so. It was only after I stopped betting it...correction: it was only after I began to fear that it would hit black that it did.

We lie here in bed, leaned up against our pillows and she pulls out a novel that contains a pretty over-the-top time-traveling element, and I roll my eyes at the story's improbability. She eyes the book I'm reading—the *Mensa Guide to Casino Gambling*—and she gives me a similar look. She knows that I'm thinking hard about how to get back the \$300 I lost earlier this week. And she knows that if I lose another \$300 while trying to win back the original \$300, I'll come

up with a strategy to win back all \$600. She knows that strategy probably won't work, but she's not as optimistic as I am.

I like exercising self-discipline and the idea of going to Gamblers Anonymous appealed to me, though I haven't nailed down exactly why yet. Perhaps it was the idea of having a problem and being able to say I beat it, I recovered. The same thing that kept me looking at the carpet in the casino the day I found the purple chip. I even went so far as to look up the local meeting places for Gamblers Anonymous. I got all excited about going to meetings at this Baptist Church on Wednesday nights. Just to be sure I knew what I was getting into I went to the Gamblers Anonymous website first, though. The organization featured a 20-question quiz to help determine whether I was a compulsive gambler. The questions were yes-or-no, and the website advises that most compulsive gamblers will answer 'Yes' to at least seven of the questions. I answered 'Yes' 13 times, but some of the answers could've gone either way.

"Read the questions to me," Liz said.

She agreed I had never jeopardized the welfare of my family because of gambling, or become suicidal. And I had never committed an illegal act in order to finance my gambling. We eventually decided I couldn't answer 'No' to "Did you ever gamble longer than you had planned?" I argued that because I always planned to gamble for an extended period of time, I didn't gamble longer than I'd intended, but ultimately she reminded me of times I tried to pull a half-hour hit-and-run that lasted well into the night. After we'd reviewed all the questions, Liz and I determined I should actually answer 'Yes' to 15 of the 20. I thought maybe it was time for

me to become a part of Gamblers Anonymous, but I still wanted to find out more before I actually went to the meeting.

I clicked on the *About Us* section: "Gamblers Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from a gambling problem."

I grew up in a church, but I haven't belonged to one in years. There's a part of me that misses that sort of community, but I don't want to be religious. I think the word *fellowship* instantly hooked me. I was eager to go meet these men and women, and to share my experience with them. But the next paragraph started with the sentence, "The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop gambling." That was a turnoff.

"It sounds like to me you don't really want to stop, you just want to sit around and talk to people about gambling," Liz said. She articulated my wants perfectly.

I'm not ready to admit it's a problem yet because I'm not entirely convinced. I don't do drugs, I'm not an alcoholic and I've been wearing the same clothes, in rotation, for the last decade. I eat vegetables, I walk my dog and I've never paid for sex. I watch the ground when I walk, specifically to look for stray casino chips or loose change. And when I find those discarded pennies, I pay attention to whether they last landed heads or tails. I think it's okay to get a little excited about the outcome maybe bringing me some future luck.

Now, Liz and I have moved away from New Orleans and it's been a year and a half since that Thanksgiving Day at the track with John. When I ask Liz what she remembers about him, from the few times they met, she rattles off descriptors like misogynistic, overweight, alcoholic. A general disregard for his physical health. Probably a gambling addict. At first she told me John smoked too much, but when I questioned her, she admitted that maybe he wasn't a smoker at all.

Because he had so many other vices, she said, she may have just added cigarettes to her memory of him. The more she tries to describe him, though, the less harsh her voice gets. She tells me she thinks John means well.

There is no doubt that he is a man of many vices, and those vices are seamlessly woven into his personality, which people love. On paper, he's not someone I would want to be friends with because he's a representative of what is wrong with society, but as I sit here a great distance from the nearest casino, paying bills online, making a salad, looking for a job, I miss John. Gambling bonds us together. That fellowship Gamblers Anonymous spoke of that appealed so much to me, maybe I find that with John, rather than with GA, because John and I don't want to quit. Gambling is the part of the equation that helps us cope with everything else. Maybe it's *because* I don't do drugs or pay for sex that I need something like gambling in my life. And maybe it's because John is a misogynistic alcoholic that he needs gambling. John didn't play pai gow for extravagant amounts of money, but he tipped the dealers and the cocktail servers well and they liked him for it. And everyone playing beside him liked hearing his stories. At least I know I did. And of all the times I sat at the pai gow table with him, he never once rode my ass about playing the bonus, which goes a long way in my book. John needs to be liked, despite his vices.

One of our last nights in New Orleans, Liz and I walked through the casino, on our way home to get some packing done, when we saw John at the pai gow table. I was afraid I'd leave town without being able to say goodbye, but there he was, in the same place I'd initially met him. Liz took the only remaining seat and in no time at all, John launched into a story about how his ex-wife is now married to the grand dragon (or whatever the title is) of the Wiccan religion.

When the cocktail server showed up, she had his double shot of Crown and a fresh Heineken, and he gave her a red chip.

"How's your daughter?" I asked. "Wasn't she going to move in with you?"

The same sadness I'd seen in John when he told me not to let Liz become a stripper returned to him when I asked about his daughter.

"It didn't go so good," he said. "She passed away a few weeks ago."

Apparently, she had drifted back into her old ways. Her vice—drugs—had gotten the better of her and she'd overdosed. John told me he'd had a hard few weeks, but that he was going to make it. Had we left him at any other location, I might not have believed him, but he was in his element at the pai gow table. And I know the calming effect it can have on the worried soul because it has soothed me. Not through the death of a loved one, but through other, smaller things—disagreements with Liz, disagreements with the meter maid, disagreements with the financial aid office—things that have turned out all right in the end.

Gambling could soothe me when I try to articulate my thoughts about gambling so that other people can read what I have to say. Gambling could soothe me while I fret about not being able to find a job. I send John a text saying I wish sitting at the pai gow table with him could be my job. He responds by saying I should be a porn star, based on who I'm with. I should be offended and/or disgusted by the comment, I know, but I also know that's just John's way of complimenting the attractiveness of Liz, who said herself, he means well.

## Chapter 16

### Getting It Back

In an effort to extract some good from my vice, I started a blog about gambling, back when we were in New Orleans. The point of it was to document my wins and losses for the year. The way it worked was simple: I gave myself \$1,000 to wager on events—everything from football games—go Saints!—to Grammy winners—go Adele! If I won, the money was added to my \$1,000, and if I lost, it was deducted from my \$1,000. After the money was gone, I was done gambling for the year. I also gave myself another \$1,000 to play with at the tables—blackjack, baccarat, online poker, pai gow, etc. I did the same thing the year before but I didn't publish it online because I was scared of how it might turn out. However, at the end of that year, I had profited around \$1,500 and felt that it was safe to show people that my gambling habit was a successful investment. After all, the blog was really about more than documenting my wins and losses—it was about holding me accountable, helping me maintain control of my gambling. Not that my gambling was out of control, but the blog was a way to *prove* that my gambling was not out of control—to my friends, to my parents, to myself.

The blog didn't go so well. A crucial point came when I got up to \$1,309.45 for my sports bets, but down to \$196.90 in the account that I care about. The account that allowed me to go to the casino. And when I sat down to write this paragraph originally, back then, I got myself a little worked up, talking about gambling, so I went and lost another \$299 at the roulette wheel. That put me in a spot because it was in February, a long way from the end of the year. I put forth a

question in an e-mail to the four guys I play cards with regularly—who all call me by my first initial, "G"—and I asked what I should do. Should I be true to the blog and my \$1,000 limit, or should I change the rules and be glad I hadn't developed a large enough following yet that anyone will actually notice? Bone and Bear told me to ride it into the ground and Bone noted that "We all know that down-in-flames G is the best G," meaning that I play the character of Loser well. I immediately agreed with the statement, but then when I tried to explain it to Liz, I had to think about what it meant to be down-in-flames G. I reminded her of the \$55,000 I pissed away. I told her how my friends and I have made it something to laugh at. It's a badge of honor that people who can't wear it would never understand. They don't have that certain jaded view of life. The other two guys, Wig and Chlope, who are each the closest thing I've ever had to a brother, didn't answer my e-mail at all. I wondered if they were too busy to respond, or if they didn't feel like enabling me that day.

Bone recently published a book called *Do Life* and it's all about how he was a fat, loser of a college kid who played video games and constantly ate delivery pizza and the whole thing encased him in this lonely, depressed world. There's a section early in the book, before he turns his life around yada, yada, and in that section he says that it wasn't his addiction with food that finally got him to hit rock bottom, but rather this one night at the Horseshoe Casino in Tunica. I was there, and I remember the night, and he included me in that section for one paragraph.

Five minutes later, I was down another hundred. When it happens badly, it usually happens quickly. Overeating is often the same way. I looked at Tara. "Let's go to the room," I said. I was deflated, demoralized. Outside, we ran into my friend Guy. He encouraged me to "get it back." (20-21)

While I'm telling him to get it back, Tara, his girlfriend at the time, tries to tell him to be careful with his money. Readers know Bone should listen to her—she's playing the Obi Wan role in the scene, the Joey Knish—but he ultimately listens to me, the Lester "Worm" Murphy. Of course he loses his ass doing that. And of course, trying to get back the losses I'd documented on the blog, I lost mine ass, too.

It's not in my nature to give up the fight, so I didn't stop the gambling blog. In the beginning I set that \$1,000 limit, which I hit in February—just two months into the year. The numbers probably stopped being accurate in July. Not that I tried to cook the books to make it look like I lost less money during the year of the blog—I won like 400 undocumented Canadian dollars during a trip to Vancouver that summer—I just lost count at some point along the way. Most of my wins and losses throughout the year, though, I was able to document. The losing number was somewhere above \$3,000, which wasn't bad until I factored in that it's three times higher than the ceiling I'd given myself and also about a third of my total income for that year.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that my losing \$3,000 to gambling, and also saying that it wasn't bad, perhaps all of that, on another level at least, was indeed bad. And I know that my doubling down on the idea, despite being aware of how it looks to you, is possibly also bad, but I'll repeat: Losing \$3,000 wasn't bad. I think I went the whole year without totally losing my cool and being blinded by rage and frustration. I simply made a lot of small bets, and the majority of those bets had unfavorable results. I lost, and I lost more than I meant to, you're right about that, but...it could've been worse. Perhaps living so close to a casino in New Orleans was bad for me, but I don't think so. I think it was good for me. When the casino is a couple of hours down the road, you've got to win enough to make the trip worth it. When the casino is a

half-mile down the road, it's easier to win \$20 and then leave with it, locking in a profit.

Regardless, things have changed now.

Liz and I have moved to Richmond, Virginia, the city she's spent most of her life in and around. There are no casinos in Richmond. Not even close. When I lived within three hours of the casinos in Mississippi, Harrah's sent me the coupons for \$10 in free play. When I moved to New Orleans, they replaced my old coupons for the ones that would work down there. Now that I've moved to Virginia, they aren't sending me any coupons. They're probably as confused as I am about where I'll go to gamble. They don't know where to lure me because it's just too far in any direction.

Here's the truth. I'm done with graduate school and even though I still dream about supporting myself by gambling, I know in my heart that it's not possible for me. At least not now that the economy is tanked and the Moneymaker Effect has worn off. So I've been looking for a job here in Richmond, but I haven't gotten as much as a nibble from a potential employer. I've borrowed more money from my mother over the past two years than I care to admit. And in all honesty, I don't even know how much it is. Liz's dad has put us up in the spare bedroom at his place while we look for work. I'm 31 years old and sleeping in bunk beds at my girlfriend's dad's house. All of the sudden it feels pointless to get excited about winning \$20 in an online poker tournament. I spent that year of blogging trying to come out on the positive end of gambling. Being \$5 ahead after a year's worth of gambling I would've considered a huge accomplishment. Never mind that I can't pay the electric bill, just as long as the reason I can't pay it isn't because I lost at the poker table.

I also have a house I bought in Arkansas a few years back, before the bubble popped or whatever, and unless I get a job soon there's a decent chance the bank will soon foreclose on me.

I've got renters in it, but that rent doesn't cover the mortgage payment. Things keep breaking that I have to repair, given that I'm the landlord. Last week my tenants called and told me the power line had fallen off the house. I had to hire an electrician to reattach it before the power company would even come near it. It's kind of fun calling electricians and plumbers because it feels like I'm an adult making adult moves. But then they say things like, "I'll try to get over there tomorrow afternoon and get you a quote." Ugh. And then I try to explain I'm not really working and how any favor they could do me would go a long way, and I sense their pity, which is the exact opposite of telling someone you just won \$28,000 by making two final tables at the WSOP circuit event.

I remember when I sat down with my mortgage broker, when I was buying the house, and after looking at my credit history he told me that there was an estimated 2% chance I wouldn't be able to pay my mortgage in full as scheduled or early.

"People like you go get that second or third job before they'll default on a home loan," the guy told me with a smile, knowing nothing about me but my credit score.

I smiled too. Probably because I recognized myself in that statement. I recognized my family in that statement. All the men and women in my family I knew to be satisfied to work hard to pay for the modest homes where we gathered around the dinner tables after church, for birthdays and holidays. I wanted to take my place in that line, where I belong. I imagine my talking to that mortgage broker gave me the same feeling some people get when they get agreeable information from their psychics. It was good to know that really smart people had enough faith in my financially succeeding at life to lend me enough money to buy a house. After the mortgage-backed securities were deemed anything but secure, it became clear that those guys who had faith in me must not be that smart after all. That their entire system had failed. A 2%

chance that I'll default, he'd said. It sounds like such a small number, but 2% is a number over 1,000 times higher than the percentage of the roulette wheel landing on red 21 times in a row. I'd already been on the losing end of that statistic. I hope it's not too late to keep from being on the losing end of the other one.

## Bibliography

Barthelme, Frederick, and Steven Barthelme. *Double Down: Reflections on Gambling and Loss*.

Boston; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999. Print.

Brunker, Mike. "Riverboat casinos going nowhere fast." *NBC News*. 9 Aug. 2004. Web. 17 Mar.

2013.

Davis, Ben. *Do Life: The Creator of My 120-Pound Journey Shows How to Run Better, Go*

*Farther, and Find Happiness*. New York; New American Library, 2013. Print.

Shackleford, Michael. *The Wizard of Odds*. 19 June 1997. Web. 5 Mar. 2013.

## Vita

Guy Choate grew up in the small town of Beebe, Arkansas. He spent six years in the Army Reserve, which included a deployment to Bosnia as a military journalist. In 2005 he tried to walk across the country, but he ultimately failed when he began hitchhiking in the Painted Desert. It is his biggest regret. He currently lives with his girlfriend Liz and their dog Kaia just outside of Richmond, Virginia where he maintains a photo-a-day blog at [www.getoutofthisplace.tumblr.com](http://www.getoutofthisplace.tumblr.com).