

“The Bet’s to You”

Friday night had come at long last. Classes could be forgotten about at least until Sunday, and no alarm clocks would offend the ear come morning. But for me, Friday night held significance beyond the frills of a weekend's inception. Friday night meant an immovable appointment over in married student housing at Alex and Laura's.

"Alright, get ready to hand me your money. We're playing 'Find the Queen.' If she doesn't show it'll be draw. Otherwise it's going to be a stud game." Stenson played this game almost every time he dealt, and for whatever reason, he always repeated the rules of the game as if we hadn't been there the last three hundred times he called it. His real name was Allen, but in the great tradition of men, we called him by his last name as a deprecating term of endearment.

He finished the third shuffle and started dealing the cards. If there was a small enough group, he would deal one-handed with his thumb always expecting us to be amazed at his Vegas-worthy skills, but more often we would get annoyed when the cards would catch an angle and land face up.

We played what *we* called "poker." But we added so many twists and wilds to our games that no real odds existed. The rationale was that it was much more fun to face off with five of a kind with an ace kicker than a lousy two pair. In "Find the Queen" for example, queens are always wild. If a queen shows on one of the up cards, then the next card dealt up is also wild. Most of our games operated on similarly absurd principles. We would throw in a normal game periodically just to maintain the illusion that we were the real deal, but also because the sweet isn't as sweet without the sour.

The first round of cards in this game went face down. So no one paid much attention to the game until Stenson started dealing the second round of cards face up. The

first up-card was an eight of hearts which went to Rob, a good natured engineering student who was enjoying his wine enough to thank Stenson for the crappy card. Next was an ace of diamonds which fell in front of Alex who answered with his usual self-assured smirk. Then CJ got a ten of clubs. Even though there was only a small portion of the cards dealt out, CJ's meticulous eyes were already scrambling round the table calculating probabilities. The amount of wilds we used drove him crazy. A jack of hearts fell in front of Diego, but he took little notice. He had his face buried in a large pina colada he had fixed while the rest of us had been dividing up the chips. I couldn't help but laugh at the image. He looked like a jolly Mexican Buddha with his large flabby arms reached around in front holding the glass that rested on his expansive waistline.

Finally Stenson dealt me a four of spades.

"Hey, where's my queen?" I asked as though I were sending back an overcooked steak.

"Right here where she belongs," he said as he dealt himself a queen. Stenson was a big clown that liked to talk trash even though he wasn't very good at it. At this dealing atrocity, the table went up in our customary protests and accusations, but Stenson just laughed triumphantly in his defense. He knew he wasn't really on trial. We all held each other as honest people, more or less, at this table. Besides, Stenson wasn't smart enough to cheat. Few of us were. More importantly, none of us wanted to win that way.

Amidst our griping, Stenson went on dealing the second round of down cards, firing back a retaliatory insult whenever he could think of one. After giving his second

down card a careful peek, Rob downed his wine and poured himself another glass. “How is everybody’s semester going?” he asked.

CJ piped up as if he had been waiting for the question and said, “Genetics is going to kick my ass.”

“Aren’t you supposed to graduate soon?” asked Rob.

“Not until I finish my internship with the hospital. That ends in August, so I should walk next fall.”

CJ was a double pre-med major who often canceled on us because he had a test in the very distant future. Sometimes we could persuade him to come anyway and he would show up with a textbook and read in between deals.

By now the cards had been dealt and we all sat pondering our possibilities.

“Bet’s to you,” Stenson said to Rob.

With a half-drunk grin, Rob threw in two quarters. We played at a five-dollar buy-in with nickels, dimes, and quarters. Two quarters was a heavy bet for a stud game, and all the more heavy coming from Rob who hardly ever bluffed.

Alex took a careful gulp from his beer and threw in two blue chips. He bluffed well, and often, and almost never folded. He had a blithe confidence that was freely carried over into everyday life. He and I were the constants in the poker-night equation. No test or term paper could keep us from a night of drinking and gambling. When no one else was crazy enough to call his bluff, I would be there to make it worth his while. In return he was usually kind enough to humor a bluff of mine that had scared off the rest of the table.

After determining the odds of a winning hand, CJ said, “I’m out.”

Diego squinted at the pile of chips in the middle and asked, “How much is it to me?”

“Fifty cents to stay in,” answered Stenson.

After a moments thought, Diego started counting out chips.

“There’s fifty to call, and I’ll raise a nickel.”

None of us really understood how Diego decided his bets, or understood anything about Diego for that matter. He had been in college forever. No one really knew what he was studying or how long he had been there. None of that seemed to bother him though. He was always happy to see you, and always up for doing something. As far as his betting went, he would bet high on a not so great hand, or continue to stay in long after his chances of winning had all but disappeared. I think he just liked throwing in chips. He was a great addition to the table because you couldn’t bring down his spirits; no matter how much money he lost.

“I’m out,” I said. I had decided as soon as Alex went in that I was out. I figured Rob had a pretty descent hand, probably a full house. And since Alex was most likely going to try and duke it out with Rob, I decided my two pair could sit out for now.

“Shit I’m out,” Stenson said as he tossed in his cards. “I didn’t think my three nines were going to cut it.” He always felt a need to explain why he folded. The reality was that he probably had better than three nines, but down-played it so we wouldn’t rag on him for folding.

The bet came back around to Rob. Rob was a man of true integrity who clung to his morals with blind resolve. He also giggled like a school girl when intoxicated. With a goofy laugh to himself, he threw in another fifty cents.

“Shit, I know that look” said Alex as he rolled his eyes and threw in his cards. Rob had one wild and one ace showing. Based on the way he had bet, he probably had four aces.

“I’ll stay,” said Diego after a sip from his colada.

“The pot’s ripe. Lay’em down ladies,” directed Stenson.

Rob turned over another wild and another ace from his down cards while gazing very happily and expectantly at Diego. Diego looked confused and asked, “isn’t this a draw game?”

Several of us slapped our heads or rolled our eye’s while CJ explained to Deigo that the queen had shown and that it was a stud game. With casual indifference, Deigo shrugged, laughed, and said, “I only have two pair,” and promptly went back to his colada.

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We usually stopped playing around 1:00 a.m. By that time we were either out of money, rich enough to stop, or too drunk to know the difference. I was usually the last to leave. Alex’s wife Laura wouldn’t let us smoke in the house, but if the night was warm enough, Alex and I would go out on his front porch for a smoke. Sometimes Laura would come out and join us, but she was usually getting ready for bed as soon as the guys left.

Alex was one of my best friends in college. I spent a lot of time with him and Laura. She was pretty cool as far as friend’s wives went. But it made me the ever-turning third wheel. Waitresses never knew what to say when asking how to split up the tickets when we would eat out. “Will this be all together, or....?” they would ask, eyes

darting around the table, not wanting to offend. I made it a point to be the one to clear it up. The awkwardness was my burden to bear. “They are on one ticket, and I am on another,” I would explain, or “They are together, I am by myself.” After the waitress left I would make jokes about “When I get a girlfriend...” to ease the tension, but I think the obvious juxtaposition made them feel guilty for always being coupled.

I suppose it was an unavoidable scenario. It wasn't that I didn't have girlfriends to even out the ratio. I was just never good at integrating them into my social circle. I had my doubts when Alex and Laura decided to marry in the middle of college. I wondered what it would mean for their relationship to suddenly merge their two worlds when they both had so much undecided about their futures. I admired their courage, but certainly didn't share in it.

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“So are we playing tonight?” I asked.

“I hope so, said Alex. I am way over due for a poker night. Have you talked to any of the other guys?”

“Not yet.”

“Well I'll call Diego and Rob if you'll take CJ and Stenson.”

The responsibility always fell to Alex and me to be the social coordinators of the group. Poker nights would never have happened if we didn't get everyone together. It's an understatement to say that Alex and I took it more serious than the other guys. We both boasted having never missed a poker night except for once when I was on vacation visiting my parents in Seattle, and he missed once because it was Laura's birthday.

Alex called me back later that day to tell me that both Diego and Rob were in, but that Rob had to work at midnight so he was cutting out early. He worked as a security guard in a factory just outside of town. He wouldn't be drinking if he were working later, which meant we would be playing with a whole different Rob. Sober Rob was a much more rational and conservative player, and thus much more successful at winning our money than his giggly, inebriated alter-ego.

I gave my report that both CJ and Stenson were in, but unfortunately Stenson was going to be late because he was having dinner with his girlfriend and supreme ruler, Gwen. Stenson had a large squared off build and geometric features, although none of it was muscle. To see him at the beck and call of his small and timid girlfriend provided us with all the defense we needed if ever his insults strayed too far. She commanded him in a slow and quiet whine like the meows of an old cat. And tonight she had softly demanded that he eat with her before he went out to play.

So it was not until 9:45 that all six of us were seated around Alex and Laura's kitchen table with our drinks and chip stacks ready to play. Having taken up the burden of shuffling, Diego had right to the first deal.

"So what's it going to be Diego?" Alex asked.

After a final shuffle, Diego responded, "We're going to play a little 'Texas hold'em'." He started dealing when suddenly reminded of something looked up and said, "Oh hey! My birthday is tomorrow. So if you guys can make it, we are all going out to eat."

"Where are we going?" I asked



“We’re going out to San Pedros,” he said. “Just come over to the house at about 7:00.”

San Pedro’s was a little mom and pop Mexican restaurant that Diego swore by when it came to authentic Mexican food. He said it was the closest thing he had found in the states to his moms cooking back home.

Diego was a big fan of “Texas Hold’em.” So when he dealt, it was either that, or another game called “Sweat” which involved nothing but luck and nerve. Hold’em was easier to swallow because it is quick and easy to deal, but still encompassed so much of the strategy of poker. Each player only has two cards to himself, while the other five fall on the table as community cards. The game is all about how you bet, and I must confess that I was no master.

I was at Diego’s left, so after a quick assessment of my cards I muttered, “check.”

“Check”

“Check”

“Check”

“A quarter.”

It was Alex. In a game like Hold’em, no two-card hand short of pocket aces is worth that kind of bet. There are just too many unknowns. It was clear to all of us that Alex was trying to push some of us out. Despite this awareness, it worked.

“Damn it Alex!” said Rob as he threw in his cards.

“I fold,” said CJ flatly, looking right at Alex, clearly annoyed that after finally playing a game with some odds, he was forced to fold so early.

Diego raised an eyebrow at the blue chip, smiled, and threw in one of his own.

I didn't like being pushed this early in the night. So I threw mine in and said, "How good can they be?"

Stenson looked at Alex with a scrutinizing grin trying to get a read on the bluff. After his glance went from Alex to his own cards and back a few times, he threw down his cards in a fold, but couldn't help but add, "I know your bluffing!"

After a few flips on the community cards, Alex had bet the pot up pretty high. Diego had evidently decided that this was too soon for him to buy back in and had folded. I was beginning to feel the same way.

The final card flipped and my whole hand amounted to two pair, but there was a possible flush on the table. Alex was wearing his assured smirk in full display. He tonelessly made his final bet. "All in."

I knew that it was a bluff, but history had taught me that a great chasm existed between what I thought I knew and what I actually did know. I was also confronted by the fact that even if he didn't have the flush, my two pair were low pairs and he could easily have three of a kind. In the end I decided that half my chips was better than none of my chips and I folded the hand.

"Well played sir," I told him.

The smirk he answered with as he stacked his winnings told me just how badly I had been duped.

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The next night I called Alex and Laura to confirm that they were going to San Pedro's and asked them for a ride out to Diego's place. On our way there, Rob called to tell us to just meet them at San Pedro's.

“How old is he going to be?” I asked.

“Twenty seven is what I heard,” said Alex.

At that time, I was at the ripe old age of twenty one. The glaring disparity caused me to spend the rest of the car ride thinking about how old twenty-seven was and where I thought I would be when I was twenty-seven. Images of suits, mortgages, and children came to mind. Not poker night or college life.

On our arrival, the three of us were led to a long table in the back. I recognized most of the people as either direct acquaintances or as friends of friends. I took a seat diagonal from Diego next to Laura. Stenson and Gwen were at the end of the table with Rob and his girlfriend who none of us knew very well. Rob and Stenson gave us a casual wave. Diego already had an empty margarita glass in front of him and was well into a second.

I watched him all through dinner. Somehow knowing how very old he was in comparison to the rest of us made me see him differently. All of a sudden I was scrutinizing all of his past life decisions with a ruthless brutality. It meant something terrible that he was at a table with his closest friends, all of whom were at least half a decade younger. I remembered first meeting him two years ago and how he had seemed old then. After that night I no longer saw him as a jolly Mexican Buddha, but instead as a man who couldn't let go of the past. I didn't understand my anger toward him at the time, but I now know it to be the bitter after-taste of pity.

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The semester marched on with its perpetual waves of tests, homework, and reading assignments, but poker was always there to get us through the tough weeks. Alex

and I continued to be the primary coordinators of poker nights, and we both maintained our nearly perfect attendance record with little interference. We went from Friday to Friday with the consistency of a metronome. When that rhythm broke, it resounded in my mind for many weeks after.

“We’re playing tonight right?” I said to Alex. It was a statement.

“Actually I don’t think I can do it tonight,” Alex solemnly replied.

After a pause of disbelief I said, “What? You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m afraid not,” he said with a shrug.

“What in the world could be more important than poker night?” I asked in complete seriousness.

“I have a job interview in the morning, so I have to get to bed at a decent hour tonight.”

I was getting desperate. “You haven’t missed a poker night since Laura’s birthday last year! You’re going to break that record now?”

“I know, I know but I really need to be ready for this interview tomorrow.” I could tell he didn’t want to let me down, but I already felt hurt and angry. I told him that he was turning into Stenson and that before long he would be skipping to spend more time with Laura. He didn’t protest. He just said, “I’m sorry dude.” I half-mocking wished him good luck in his interview and then told him I’d talk to him later.

Things got worse as the semester progressed. Instead of talking about classes and girlfriends, the guys started talking about job applications and graduate programs, topics I didn’t even plan to think about for quite some time. I was a year younger than most of them, and a couple years behind them in my career plans because I still hadn’t picked a

major. I was still very unsure of what I wanted to do with my life and so instead of working towards anything, I chose to slow my academics down and wait until I figured it out. Jobs and grad school were very exact pieces of a future I hadn't begun to build.

As time went on, they talked more often about their lives after graduation. Similarly, it became more difficult to get everybody together on Friday nights. Rob got an internship in the engineering department of the factory he worked at. He spent most evenings in the labs working with the other engineers. This typically included Friday nights and he would have to cancel on us in dutiful dedication to his work.

Stenson started looking for jobs in Colorado and had to take several trips up to Denver with Gwen while she looked at schools to do her grad work at.

CJ was impossible to persuade if he had any kind of test in the next month. He insisted that he was applying for med school in the fall and that he needed to keep his GPA up.

I eventually gave up my campaign to keep Friday nights alive. I started making other plans on Fridays without reservation. Several weeks went by without so much as a phone call regarding poker. I finally heard from Alex, but he hadn't called about poker. He called to see if I was coming to graduation.

I didn't go to the graduation, but not out of bitterness. A shift at work provided a legitimate excuse for my absence. I talked to most of the guys after the ceremony trying to figuring out who was leaving when. It turned out that we were all going to be in town the following month. We decided we should do one last poker night.

It was late June when we got together. Alex and Laura's house was already littered with boxes freshly scrawled on with black sharpie. We engaged in standard small

talk as we divvied up the chips and mixed our drinks. As we began to actually play however, the time that had passed without us playing was evident. We offered our quips and insults at the right times, and laughed and joked and as we should; but the evening was riddled with the feeling that we were all delivering lines from a play that we hadn't performed in awhile; as if we had forgotten how to be friends. The night didn't carry the good times it used to. There was a guilt and a confusion that hung about the room as we looked at each other hoping one of would know how to restore what once was. No one did. We said our goodbyes earlier than usual using travel and schedules as excuses. I wished them all good luck in the lives that lay ahead of them. Afterward, Alex and I went out for a smoke.

“You guys aren't going to move off and forget about me are you?” I asked half joking.

“No way dude,” he said

“You got my new number right?”

“Yeah, Laura wrote it down somewhere.”

“So when do you start work?”

“They want me to start a week from Monday. Can you still help us with the move?”

“Yeah, no problem.” We sat the rest of the time in silence and let the crickets do the talking.

Later that week I helped them load up the U-haul that would take them to some town in North Carolina where Alex had gotten a job as a financial consultant for an insurance company.

I called them from time to time just to see what was going on and find out if he and Laura were going to be in town soon. Really I was calling to find something I had lost. Alex was tolerating his new job and Laura got a job teaching at one of the elementary schools. The conversations went well, but Alex always seemed to expect me to need something. After telling me about his life for a while or making small talk, he would pause and ask with great concern, “So is everything okay with you?”

Eventually I stopped calling.

Diego was still around and would call me often to go out to eat or to go shoot some hoops. At first I would go, but things weren't the same. It felt odd to be hanging out with him outside of poker. I stopped returning his calls. Then I started avoiding him altogether. Eventually he stopped calling.

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That was all months ago. I've since found a new circle of friends. They are younger guys with little concern for classes but an intense dedication to having a good time. Once, I was reminiscing about how we used to play poker every Friday at Alex and Laura's house. The story was enough inspiration for them, and now I find myself sitting at a friend's kitchen table with a stack of chips in front of me.

“Jake, are you in?” my friend Brandon asks.

“Uh, yeah,” I say. “What's the bet up to?”

“Twenty cents to stay in.”

Picking through my chips I say, “Okay, here's twenty, and I am going to raise a nickel.”

Two guys call me and I loose to a queen high flush. One guy takes a drink of his beer and says he can't wait until he turns twenty-one. "How old are you?" I ask.

"Nineteen," he says.

"He's three years younger than me," I thought. I knew the other guys had to be close to his age. At age twenty-two I suddenly understood the change in the way I saw in Diego that night at San Pedro's. I see the same change in myself except that I'm not clinging to the past as he was, hoping to relive the glory days. Instead, I was running from the future and the uncertainty that came with it.

All at once I don't feel right sitting at this table anymore. I yell over my shoulder as I walk out onto the front porch that I am going for a smoke. I think about my old friends and wonder what each is doing right now. I think of Stenson, perfectly content under the tyranny of Gwen. I think of Rob enjoying the challenge of his work, and CJ staring through a microscope surround by other meticulous eyes. I think of Diego as a Mexican Buddha.

My thoughts finally land on Alex and Laura and the life they are building together with all of its adulthood: marriage, family, career. I hold this thought in my mind as I turn to look over the fading lights of our small college town. I spend the last of my cigarette as I stare into the night, and for the first time daring to dream of what lies ahead.