

BEYOND RANGE

THE  
*Bad Beats*

*Notes on a Practice in Disguise*

MMXXVI

*beyondrange.org*

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First Edition

Beyond Range · [beyondrange.org](http://beyondrange.org)

*A practice in disguise*

## A Note Before You Begin

You came here for the stories about brutal rivers. The two-outers. The set-over-set. The flush that hit on a card he barely had. The cooler that ended your tournament with three to go.

This is not that book.

This book is about the other bad beats. The ones the world does not see. The friend who passed you in stakes and is now in the podcasts and the profiles. The partner who asks how the session went and does not ask the follow-up. The Tuesday at three in the morning when you decided you hated the game and yourself for doing it. The years that have gone by without arriving anywhere. The person you become at the table that you would not want as a friend if you met him in real life.

These are bad beats too. They are, I would argue, the worst ones. They do not show up on your graph. You cannot tell your buddies about them at the rail. You absorb them privately, year after year, and they cost you something the river card never could.

This book is for those bad beats. Each chapter sits inside one. I am not going to fix them. I do not believe they can be fixed. I believe they can be held differently, and I believe that the difference between holding them one way and holding them another way is the difference between a player who keeps going and a player who one day, quietly, stops.

The chapters are short. Read one a night. Sit with it. Don't rush to the next. If a chapter does not land, skip it. Come back later. The book is here to say what it has to say. What you do with it is not the book's business.

I will be honest about my position. I have taken every one of the bad beats in this book. I have sat through the long downswings. I have hated the game late at night. I have asked whether the years were wasted. I have been the person at the table I would not want as a friend. I have not solved any of this. I am still in some of it now.

What I have, after enough years, is a slightly different relationship to the pain. The pain is still there. But it is held by something larger than itself. Something the cards cannot reach. Something that was here before I sat down for the first time and will be here after I sit down for the last. That something is what these chapters are pointing at.

It does not have a good name. The phrase that comes closest, for me, is *loved and wanted-nothing-from* — the

feeling of being held by something that is not asking you to win, not asking you to perform, not asking you to be anyone other than who you are in this moment. Most of us have felt this once or twice in our lives. Almost none of us have learned to live from it.

The path of poker, walked long enough, can be a way of finding it.

That is the secret these pages are not really keeping. The bad beats are doing something. The pain is doing something. The years are doing something. You are not being broken. You are being prepared.

If you are in pain right now, read slowly.

If you are not in pain right now, save the book for when you are.

You will be.

# I

## THE RIVER

There is a hand you played that you cannot stop replaying.

It happened months ago, maybe years. You can describe it from memory, in detail, without effort. The action. The cards. The size of the bet. What he said when he tabled. The way the dealer looked at you before pushing the chips across.

You did not choose to memorize it. The memorization happened by itself, in the hours after the session, while you were trying to do other things. You went home. You ate something. You sat on the couch. You tried to watch a show. The hand was there. You went to bed. The hand was there. You woke up at four. The hand was there. Even-

tually you slept and the hand kept playing in some part of you that does not need you to be awake.

This is the bad beat we tell stories about. The two-outer. The cooler. The one where you played it perfectly and the universe decided otherwise.

I want to say something honest about it.

The river card did not actually hurt you.

I mean this carefully. The chips changed hands. The bankroll moved. The session ended differently than it would have if the card had been any other. All of this is real. None of this is what you are still feeling six months later when the hand surfaces in the shower or three days into a holiday or in the middle of a conversation with someone you love.

What is still hurting you is something else. Something the chips were standing in for. Something that was already there before the hand and that the hand exposed.

Let me try to name it.

You had walked into that hand carrying an unconscious belief. The belief was: if I play correctly, I will be rewarded. Not as a long-term statement about expected value. As a moment-to-moment expectation. A faith. You were carrying it without knowing you were carrying it. Most players are. The faith is so reflexive that you cannot see it until something violates it.

The river violated it. Not just by costing you chips. By telling you, in the most direct language available, that the game does not work the way your unconscious belief said it worked. You play correctly. You can lose. You play correctly. You can lose for a long time. The world does not make the contract you thought it made when you sat down.

This is the actual injury. It is not an injury about money. It is an injury about how reality is constructed. You had been operating on a model of the world in which good behavior produces good outcomes, and the river told you that the model is false, and you have been refusing to accept what the river told you. The replay is the refusal. Every time you replay the hand, some part of you is going back to that moment and asking the universe, again, to please change its mind. The universe does not. You replay it again. The universe still does not.

This loop is the haunting.

I can say this from the inside because I lived in this loop for many years. There was a hand I played early in my career that I replayed for almost a year. I would be doing the dishes. The hand would come up. I would feel the small punch in the chest. I would shake my head. I would go back to the dishes. An hour later, the hand would come up. I would feel the punch again. This continued, every

day, for the better part of a year. I did not choose for it to happen. It happened.

What stopped it was not finding peace with the hand. The hand is still in me somewhere, available for replay if I want it. What stopped it was a slow recognition that the model the hand had violated was the wrong model in the first place. The game does not work the way I had unconsciously needed it to work. It never did. The river did not create the unfairness. It only revealed it. I had been sitting at the table for years inside an illusion, and the river had finally cracked the illusion, and the cracking was painful, but the illusion was the actual problem and not the river.

This is the thing I want to land here, because I do not think this is being said clearly enough in the literature.

The bad beat is not your enemy. The bad beat is your teacher. The teaching is uncomfortable. The teaching is that the universe does not owe you the outcome that matches your decision, and that any psychological architecture you have built that depends on this owing-relationship is going to be slowly destroyed by the game over the course of your career. The game is in the destruction business. Most players do not understand this.

If you are still being haunted by a hand from years ago, the haunting is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign that the architecture has not finished collapsing yet. You are still

partially inside the old model. Some part of you is still expecting the universe to make the trade you implicitly negotiated when you sat down. The universe has not made the trade. It will not make the trade. The replay is the residue of you continuing to ask.

What is the way through?

I do not think there is a way through that lets you keep the architecture and stop the haunting. The haunting comes from the architecture. You can shorten it with various techniques — meditation, journaling, talking it out with someone who actually understands. These help. They do not fix the underlying issue.

The underlying issue gets fixed only by a slow shift in what you are actually relying on for your sense of okayness in the world. While you are relying on the cards to confirm you, the cards will keep delivering the message that you are not confirmed. You will keep feeling it as injury. The replay will keep happening.

When you have built up, slowly, over years, some other source of okayness — something that does not depend on the river card — the cards lose the power they had. The river still happens. Your stomach still drops. But the drop is shorter now. The replay is briefer. The hand stops surfacing in the shower. Not because you have suppressed it. Because the part of you that needed the result has thinned

out, and the result no longer reaches the place where it used to land.

What is this other source of okayness?

This is the question this whole book is circling around. I will not answer it cleanly here because it cannot be answered cleanly. I will gesture at it.

There is, in you, a part that is not the player. It was there before you played your first hand. It is the part that is reading these words right now. It does not have a stake in the outcome of any particular session. It has been watching you play for as long as you have been playing. It has watched the wins and the losses, the upswings and the downswings, the hands that broke you and the hands that lifted you. It has not been moved by any of them. It is the witness underneath the player.

When you are inside the haunted replay, you are identified with the player. The player needs the river to have come differently. The player is suffering.

The witness is not suffering. The witness has been watching the suffering, with a kind of patient curiosity, for as long as the suffering has been happening. The witness knows that the chips do not matter as much as you think they do. The witness knows that there is no scenario in which the chips can hurt what you actually are, because what you actually are is the witness, not the player.

Most of your sessions you spend identified with the player. This is fine. This is required, in some sense, for the play to be sharp. The player has to care enough to play well.

But the witness is available. The witness is always available. The witness is what notices, three days into the haunting, that you are stuck in a loop. The witness is what reads these words right now without being inside the haunted player. The witness is your way out of every cycle you have ever been stuck inside.

The river that haunts you was a river that landed on the player. The witness was watching from a quieter place the whole time. He has not been hurt. He has been waiting for you to come back to him.

You can come back to him now.

This is what the brand on the cover of this book is gesturing at. There is a range of outcomes that the player cares about. Inside that range, you suffer when the cards go a certain way. Beyond range is the place where the witness sits, watching the cards, watching the suffering, watching the replay, untouched by any of it.

You do not need to escape the player. The player is fine. The player is doing his job. You need to remember that you are also the witness, and the witness is where you live when you have nothing to prove and nothing to lose.

The hand that has been haunting you cannot reach the witness. It has been knocking on the player's door for months. The player has been answering it. The witness has been in another room the whole time, waiting for you to walk in.

Walk in.

The hand will keep happening for a while. The replays will keep coming. But each time, you will notice them from a slightly different place. You will notice that you are noticing. The noticing is the witness arriving. The witness arrives, and the haunting loosens, not because you have done anything to it, but because you have stopped sitting in the room it lives in.

After enough of this, the hand becomes just a hand. You can think about it without the punch. You can describe it to someone without the chest tightening. It has not been forgotten. It has been integrated. It is now data, not wound.

This is what the bad beat was for. This was always what it was for. The bad beat was not punishment. It was an invitation. The invitation was: come find the part of yourself that the river cannot reach. You are spending too much of your life in the part it can.

You will not accept this invitation easily. Almost no one does. The first dozen times the river comes for you, you will refuse. You will stay in the player's room. You

will replay the hand. You will suffer. This is fine. The invitations keep coming. The river is patient.

Eventually — usually after enough years that you cannot quite specify the moment — you start accepting. You take the hand and instead of replaying it, you look at it. You see what it was telling you. You see the place inside you that needed the result to be different. You let that place soften a little. The witness comes forward. The hand goes from wound to teacher.

This is what the long path produces. The same river that broke you at twenty-five becomes a koan you can sit with at forty. The chips have not changed. The river has not changed. You have changed. The change is what the practice was always for.

You will lose more rivers. You will lose them next year and the year after. The cards will keep telling you the same thing they have always been telling you. You are not in control. The model you were operating on was wrong. There is something larger to live from.

The third time you really hear it, the haunting stops being available. You can still get there if you want. You usually don't.

Sit with this for a moment.

The river that has been replaying in you for months — let it come up now, if it wants to. Don't push it away.

Don't reach for it either. Just let it be there, the way you would let a song play in the background while you cook.

Notice that you are reading these words. Notice that you are not inside the hand. Notice that there is a part of you doing the noticing. That part is not the player. The player would be lost in the hand. You are not lost in it right now. You are watching it.

Stay there for a moment.

That is where you live.

The hand happens to someone else.

## II

### THE LONG LOSS

Everyone knows about the bad night. Almost no one writes about the bad year.

You can hear stories about the worst session anyone ever had. The streamer crying on cam. The phone-throwing video. The forum post with three exclamation marks in the title. These are spectacles. They are short. They have a beginning, middle, and end, and they get talked about for a few days and then everyone moves on.

The long loss has none of this. The long loss is the months — sometimes the years — when nothing breaks your way. You play. You play well, mostly. You study. You take care of your body, more or less. You do all the things the books tell you to do. And the graph keeps going down.

Or it goes flat. Or it teases you with a small upswing that turns out to be a head fake before another month of sliding.

This is the bad beat that almost no one talks about, because there is nothing to say. It is not a story. It is a stretch. It is a slow erosion that you wake up inside of every morning and that does not announce itself dramatically and that no one outside of you can see.

I want to sit inside the long loss for a moment, because the literature on it is thin, and I think the players going through it deserve better than they have been given.

What does the long loss actually feel like?

It feels like waking up tired. Not physically tired — psychologically tired, in a way you cannot name when someone asks you. You roll over. You check your phone. You feel the weight of the upcoming session before you have even gotten out of bed. The session is waiting for you. So is the next one. So is the one after that. You have committed to a profession that requires you to keep showing up, and the showing up has lost the small thrill it used to have, and now it is just an obligation that you have made to yourself, and you are not sure why you keep honoring it.

It feels like everything getting smaller. Your willingness to take risks at the table shrinks. Your willingness to play your usual hands shrinks. Your willingness to bluff shrinks. You start checking spots where you would have

bet. You start folding hands you used to call. None of this is conscious. You would tell anyone who asked that you are playing your normal game. You are not. The long loss has been quietly editing your game in the direction of safety, and the safety is the leak that is making the loss longer.

It feels like the people in your life noticing without naming it. Your partner asks what you want for dinner and you say you don't care. The not-caring is new. They notice. They don't say anything. You notice that they noticed. You go to the gym less. You see your friends less. The contraction is general. Everything in your life is shrinking to a slightly smaller version of itself, in sympathy with the bankroll that is doing the same.

It feels like the math becoming abstract. You know, intellectually, that you have an edge. You can quote the math. You can explain to a beginner that variance is a real thing and that downswings are normal and that your true winrate has not changed because the cards have been doing what they have been doing. You can give the lecture. You cannot believe the lecture. The lecture lives in your forebrain. The fear lives in your stomach. The forebrain has lost the argument with the stomach, and you cannot win it back by repeating yourself.

This is the long loss. Most players have been in it. Most players will be in it again. The strategy books mostly will

not tell you what to do about it because there is mostly nothing to do about it.

I want to say what I have come to know about it.

The first thing is that the long loss is not asking you to fix it. The long loss is asking you to survive it. These are different projects. Most of what gets called *fixing* a downswing is panic dressed up as initiative. New coach. New software. New game selection. New psychology routine. Each of these can be useful in isolation, and each of them, in the middle of a downswing, is mostly a way of not sitting with the thing you are inside of. The fixing is the avoidance. The fixing is its own kind of leak.

The actual work of the long loss is small. It is keeping the routine. It is showing up to the session you scheduled. It is playing the hands as they come. It is closing the laptop at the time you said you would close it. It is going to the gym you said you would go to. It is having dinner with the person you said you would have dinner with. It is the daily, unglamorous, almost embarrassing work of continuing to be the person you were before the loss started, on the assumption — the faith — that the loss will end and that the person you were continuing to be in the meantime is the person who will still be standing when it does.

This is much less than most players want to do. Most players want to do something heroic. Heroism is incompatible with the long loss. The long loss kills heroism. The

long loss requires the unheroic, almost monastic discipline of doing exactly the same thing you would have done if you were running great, on the days when you are running terribly, with no expectation that it will pay off any time soon.

The strike I want to land here, because no one else will land it for you, is this:

You are inside the long loss because variance is a real thing and because variance does not care about you. That is most of it. But there is a part of it — and I am being honest with you now, even though it is uncomfortable — that is also you. There is a part of every long loss that is being extended by the player's response to it. The scared play. The narrowed range. The slightly too-tight defense on the river. The check where you used to value-bet. Each of these is small. Together they take a normal downswing and turn it into a long loss. The variance is real. The amplification of the variance is partly your contribution.

This is the unwelcome news. You will resist it. You will want to blame the cards entirely, because the alternative is to look at the way you have been changing in the loss, and looking at that is uncomfortable. Look anyway. The looking is the work.

The fix is not to play looser to compensate. That is the same panic in the opposite direction. The fix is to notice the contraction and gently expand back into the player you

were before the loss started. To make the value bet you would have made. To call the river you would have called. Not as defiance. Not as compensation. Just as the return to the player you were when the cards were behaving. That player is still in you. He has gotten quieter. The loss has been quieting him for weeks. Find him. Let him play.

This is delicate work. It cannot be done with willpower. It is more like remembering than deciding. You sit down at the table and you remember, in your body, what it felt like to play freely. You let the body return to that state. The plays follow.

If you cannot do this — if the contraction is too deep and the body cannot unclench — drop a stake. Not as defeat. As a tactical move to a place where the contraction does not have to be fought. At the lower stake, the body unclenches by itself, because the stakes are no longer activating the fear. You play your real game there for a while. The bankroll recovers. You move back up when the body has remembered.

There is no shame in this. The shame in the dropping stakes is a fiction the ego invented to keep you above your edge. The ego cares about your perceived position. The witness — the part of you that is not the player — does not care about your perceived position. It cares about your wellbeing and your return to clear play. Drop the stake.

Let the witness handle the ego's protests. The ego will adjust.

Now the open part.

The long loss is doing something, even though it does not feel like it. The long loss is dismantling the part of you that needs the cards to be on your side. While the cards are on your side, you cannot see this part. It is invisible. It hides inside your wins. The long loss exposes it. You start to see exactly which parts of your psychology depend on a recent winning session for stability, and which parts do not.

The parts that depend on the winning session are the parts that have to be rebuilt on a different foundation. The long loss is the rebuilding. It is a forced renovation of the parts of you that the wins were quietly subsidizing. After the renovation, those parts are no longer dependent on the wins. They have been rebuilt on something else. Something more reliable.

This is hard to describe to someone who has not been through it. You go into the long loss as one player and come out of it as another player. The new player has been worked on by the loss. He carries less. He needs less. He is no longer relying on the cards to confirm him. The cards are now allowed to do what cards do, without it touching the part of him that he lives from.

The long loss made him. He could not have been made any other way.

I do not say this to bypass the suffering. The suffering during the long loss is real and you are right to take it seriously. But I want you to know that the suffering is not for nothing. The suffering is the price of becoming someone who can no longer be moved by what the cards are doing. The long loss is the curriculum. The end of the long loss is graduation, even if it does not feel like it at the time.

When the loss finally ends — and they all end, eventually, even the long ones — you will not feel triumphant. You will feel quiet. You will sit at the table the next morning, and the cards will be doing what they do, and you will notice that you are not as moved by it as you used to be. You will play a hand correctly and lose it. You will feel the flicker of the old hurt. The flicker will be smaller than it used to be. You will play the next hand. You will play the next session. You will play the next year.

You will be different. The difference is what the loss was for.

This is the secret of the long loss that the strategy books cannot tell you. It is not that the loss is good. The loss is awful. It is that the loss is doing something that nothing else can do, and the something it is doing is the thing that separates the players who keep going for thirty years from

the players who quit at year five wondering what went wrong.

You are being made into a player who can sit through anything.

The making is happening now.

Continue.

# III

## THE FRIEND WHO PASSED YOU

You came up with someone.

It was a long time ago. You both started around the same year. You played the same stakes. You shared screen names you would not share with anyone now. You sweated each other's sessions on Skype calls that lasted past three in the morning. You sent each other hand histories that you both still remember. You were a unit, briefly, in the way young players sometimes are when neither of you knows yet that the path is going to separate.

The path separated.

He is now somewhere you are not. Higher stakes, maybe. Or in the podcasts. Or in the profiles. Or just quietly at a

table you have not yet been invited to. He is doing fine. You are also doing fine. He is more fine than you are.

You do not talk about this with him. You do not, mostly, talk about it with anyone. It is too embarrassing to name. *I am jealous of my friend* is not something a grown man says easily. So you carry it privately, which is the way the bad beats in this book all get carried. You see his name pop up. You feel the small, hot, unwanted feeling in the chest. You scroll past. You do not investigate.

I want to investigate it for you, because I have been you, and because the unexamined version of this pain costs more than it has to.

The first thing to say honestly is that the pain is not really about him.

You think it is. When the feeling comes up, it has his face on it. It feels like a feeling about him. But if you look closely you will notice that the feeling does not require him in any specific way. Any friend who passed you would produce the same feeling. The friend is the occasion for the feeling. He is not the cause of the feeling.

The cause is something you have built quietly inside yourself over many years. You have built a story in which your worth as a player — and, deeper than that, your worth as a person — is being measured against a peer group. The peer group includes him. The story has been keeping a quiet score, year by year, on which of you is winning. He

has been winning more lately. The story is reporting back to you that you are losing. The losing-feeling is the report.

The story is doing what stories do. It does not know that it is wrong. It is doing its job, which is to keep you oriented in the social world by tracking your relative position. It has been doing this since before language. It is older than you are.

But the story is wrong.

Not wrong about him. He is, in fact, doing better than you on the metrics the story is using. The story is wrong about the *measurement*. There is no race that you and he were both in. The story made up the race. You both started playing poker at the same time, and the story took that fact and built a story in which the two of you were running the same course, and the one who arrived at the higher stake first was the winner.

You were not running the same course. He was running his life. You were running yours. The fact that both of you happened to play poker is not enough to make a race out of two unrelated paths. The race is a fiction the story constructed to give itself something to score.

This is the strike I want to land. Take it directly. The pain you are feeling is not about him. It is the pain of having spent years inside a story that built a race where there was no race, and now the story is reporting that you are losing, and you are believing the report. You can stop

believing the report. You can stop running the race. The race was never real.

I will say it more sharply, because the gentle version of this never lands. The friend who passed you is not your problem. The story that has been quietly comparing you to him for ten years is your problem. He is fine. He is doing his thing. He is not thinking about you. He is in his own life, which has its own bad beats that you do not see because you only see his wins. The story is feeding you a curated version of his life and asking you to compete with the curation. The curation is not him. The curation is what your story has made of his Twitter.

Most of the pain people feel about other players is pain about a curation, not about a person. If you actually sat with him for an hour and asked him how things were going, you would probably find that the gap between his life and yours is much smaller than the curation suggests, that he is also struggling with things you do not see, that the trophy you imagined him receiving for passing you in stakes does not exist anywhere in his actual experience, that he is just a guy doing his thing the way you are doing yours.

This is part of why the pain is so isolating. You cannot share it without admitting it, and admitting it requires admitting that you have been measuring yourself against an imaginary version of someone you actually like, and the

admission is humiliating. So you carry the feeling alone. The carrying alone makes it heavier. The heaviness convinces you that the feeling must be important, since it is so heavy, which keeps you carrying it.

Put it down.

I do not mean this as therapy-speak. I mean it as a literal instruction. The next time the feeling comes up — and it will, soon, because feelings like this come up many times a week for most of us — notice the feeling. Notice the face it has. Notice the story underneath the face. Then, as a small experiment, drop the story. Don't fight it. Don't replace it with a better story. Just notice that the story is what is producing the feeling, and that you are not obligated to keep running the story, and let it pass through.

You will be surprised by how quickly the feeling thins out. It is being held up by the story. Without the story, it has nothing to stand on.

You will also notice, the more you do this, that there is a part of you that does not actually want to drop the story. The story has been useful. It has motivated you. It has kept you grinding through years when the grinding was unpleasant. The story is a coach who has been driving you, and the driving has produced some of the work that you are now proud of. To drop the story is to lose the coach. Some part of you is not sure who you will be without him.

This is honest. The story has given you things. The story has also taken things from you. The peace you feel when you scroll past your friend's name without the small hot punch — that peace is what the story has been costing you. Year after year. Day after day. You have been paying for the motivation with the peace, and the bill has been larger than you knew.

Now the open part.

There is a place to live from that does not run the race.

This is the place where the brand on the cover of this book points. *Loved and wanted-nothing-from*. Most of us have only felt this place once or twice, and usually not for long. A moment with a parent before we knew language. A morning alone in nature. A night with someone who loved us when we were doing nothing they could possibly need from us. In those moments, we noticed that we were okay without doing anything. We did not need to be winning. We did not need to be ahead. We did not need to be anything. We were just here. The okayness was the floor.

Most of life since has been spent forgetting this floor. The story took over. The story said the floor was not enough, that we had to keep building, keep arriving, keep passing, keep being passed. The floor is still under the story. We have just stopped feeling it.

The friend who passed you cannot reach the floor. He did not pass you on the floor. The race the story has been

running is on a different surface entirely — the surface of metrics and stakes and who-is-where. The floor underneath is not in the race. The floor is the same floor for both of you and for everyone else who ever sat at a table or went to a job or grew old.

When you can feel the floor, even briefly, the friend's success becomes information about him rather than a verdict on you. You can be glad for him. You can text him. You can ask how it has been. You can be the friend you used to be when you were both unknown. The pass is not happening on the floor. The pass is happening on a surface that does not actually exist as anything other than a story, and you are no longer obligated to live there full-time.

This is harder than it sounds. The floor is hard to find under most of the conditions we live in. We need help. We need practices. We need other people who know about the floor. We need years of work to make the floor accessible by default rather than as a rare moment of grace.

But the work is real and the floor is real, and the friend who passed you was always — even in the moment of passing — standing on the same floor as you, doing his version of what we are all doing, which is trying to figure out how to be okay in a life that does not give us the manual.

Be glad for him. He is doing his thing.

You are doing yours.

The race was never real.

You can stop running it now if you want.

# IV

## THE PARTNER

We are going to talk about the person who shares your life with you.

They have been quietly afraid for a long time.

You may know this. You may not. You may know it intellectually and not feel it. They have not always told you they are afraid. They have learned, over years, that telling you only makes things worse, because you become defensive, and the defensiveness makes them feel unheard, and the unheard-ness is the actual thing they were afraid of. So they have stopped telling you, mostly. They ask how the session went. They listen to your answer. They go to bed.

This is one of the most ordinary bad beats in poker, and one of the least discussed. The relationship strain. The

slow accumulation of small unspoken things. The version of you that comes home from a losing session who is not quite the version of you they fell in love with. The way the swings have inserted themselves into a household that did not sign up for swings.

I want to sit inside this for a while, because I have been on both sides of it and the literature is almost useless on it.

Let me describe what is actually happening in their head.

They love you. This is the foundation. Whatever I say next about the difficulty does not undo the foundation. They love you. They want you to be okay. They want the life you are building together to be okay. They are not against you.

But they live in a household where the income is variable in ways most households' income is not. They watch your face when you walk through the door and try to read whether tonight is going to be a good night or one of the nights when you are unreachable. They have learned the small signs. They know what your body looks like after a winning session and what it looks like after a losing one. They have catalogued these without ever telling you they were cataloguing.

This catalogue is exhausting to maintain. They do not have access to your bankroll the way you do. They do not

have the math to reassure themselves that this month is just variance. They have only your face, your shoulders, your tone, and their own fear, which the variability of the income is steadily feeding. Every losing month is making the fear larger. The fear does not have anywhere to go because they have learned it is unwelcome.

So they ask how the session went. You say *fine* or *bad* or *I don't want to talk about it*. They take the answer and put it in the catalogue and go to make dinner.

This is the relationship now. You have not noticed how much you have outsourced to it. You have outsourced your emotional regulation to their willingness not to ask too many questions. You have outsourced your financial anxiety to their willingness to trust the process they do not fully understand. You have outsourced your sense of legitimacy to their willingness to pretend that this is a real career even when their family is asking what you do for a living.

They have been holding all of this. They did not sign up to hold it. They are holding it because they love you. The holding has been costing them something.

The strike I want to land is this:

You have been resenting them for not understanding.

You have not said this. You may not have admitted it to yourself. But it is there. You feel it in the small flashes when they ask the question they always ask and you do not

want to answer it. You feel it in the way you do not bring up the actual stakes of what is happening, because you do not want to have the conversation about them. You feel it in your impatience with their fear, which seems irrational to you because you know the math.

But the resentment is not fair. They are not failing to understand. They are *correctly understanding* that the household income is variable in ways that most households' incomes are not, and that you are the only person in the household who has the framework to handle this variability, and that they are being asked to live inside your framework without having access to it. They are not bad at this. The arrangement is unfair. The arrangement asks them to trust a process they do not have the tools to evaluate, and to do this for years, and to keep their fear to themselves while they do it.

You are the one who chose poker. They did not choose poker. They chose you, and poker came with you, and they have been adjusting to it for as long as you have been together.

This needs to be said clearly because most poker players do not say it clearly to themselves. The cost of your career is not just on you. It is on them too, in ways you do not fully see. They are paying part of the price of your work. They are doing it quietly and mostly without com-

plaint and you have, over the years, started to take this for granted.

The taking-for-granted is the leak in the relationship.

Now I want to say something more uncomfortable.

You have been using their fear as evidence that they do not believe in you.

When they ask the question, you hear it as doubt. You hear it as them not trusting you. You hear it as a small accusation. So you defend. You say *fine*. You shut the conversation down. You go to your office.

But the fear was not doubt. The fear was love. They were afraid because they love you and your wellbeing is wrapped up with theirs and the variability is genuinely worth being afraid of. Their fear is the appropriate response of someone who loves a person whose income graph looks like the one yours looks like. You have been treating their love as an attack. This has been the actual injury in the relationship for a long time, and neither of you has been able to name it.

When you can finally see this — that their fear is love, that it has always been love, that the question they keep asking is the love trying to find a way through — the resentment dissolves. You stop hearing the question as doubt. You start hearing it as care. You start answering it differently.

This is delicate because most relationship advice in poker tells you to *manage their expectations* or *educate them on variance*. Both of these miss what is happening. You cannot educate someone out of the fear of losing the person they love. The fear is structural. It will not respond to a course on poker math. The fear needs to be met with what the fear is actually for, which is connection, which is presence, which is the small consistent acts of being there that tell them they are still inside something that has not been broken by the swings.

What can you do?

The first thing is to understand that they are not the problem. The arrangement is the problem, and the arrangement is being held mostly by them because you have not yet taken your share of it. Take your share. This means doing some of the emotional work that you have been outsourcing. It means coming home from a losing session and putting the loss down before you walk through the door. Not pretending it did not happen. Just not bringing the loss into the household as the only thing in the room.

The second thing is to give them, regularly and without their having to ask, the information they need to feel safe. The bankroll is fine. The month is normal. The downswing is within the expected range. You do not have to teach them the math. You just have to give them the conclusions,

gently, so that they do not have to construct them in their head from your facial expressions.

The third thing is the harder one. You have to stop using your work as the reason you cannot be present. The session ran long. The downswing requires extra study. The grind is what it is. Some of this is true. Some of it is the way you have been hiding from the relationship inside the work. Notice the difference. Notice the days when the work was the work, and notice the days when the work was a way to not be in the kitchen for the conversation about the brother-in-law's wedding. The first is fine. The second is the pattern you have been using to pay for your absence with your time. The pattern is not working. The relationship cannot be paid for in time. It can only be paid for in presence.

Now the open part, because this chapter cannot end here.

There is a way to be in this relationship that the variability does not break.

It is not the way you have been doing it. The way you have been doing it asks the relationship to absorb the variability silently, in exchange for which you provide the income and the lifestyle. This is a transaction. It works for a while. It does not work for a lifetime. The transaction wears down because no one is being seen inside it.

The way that does not break asks for a different exchange. You bring your variability in honestly. You let them see the real shape of your work, including the hard months. You let them be afraid in front of you instead of in private. You hold their fear without defending against it. They hold yours. You become, slowly, two people in a relationship where both of you are aware of what the work costs and both of you are choosing to keep doing it together.

This is much more vulnerable than you have been. It will be uncomfortable for a while. You will discover that some of the fear they have been carrying privately is bigger than you thought. You will discover that some of the resentment you have been carrying privately was unfair to them. You will both have to grow up a little inside the relationship, in ways that will feel like work but will start to feel, after a while, like home.

This is the place where the brand on the cover of this book actually lives, in the part of your life that is not poker. *Loved and wanted-nothing-from*. The person who shares your life is, when the relationship is working, one of the few sources of this in your life. They love you and they are not asking you to be a winning player to deserve the love. They are not asking you to perform. They are not waiting for you to arrive somewhere. They are loving the person who is currently in front of them, with whatever bankroll

he currently has, with whatever month he is currently inside.

Most of us have not let ourselves receive this. We assume the love is contingent on the wins. We bring home the wins and hide the losses. We perform a version of ourselves that we think the relationship can stand. We do this for so long that the relationship starts to feel like a stage we are managing, and the management starts to drain the love.

Stop performing. Bring the actual you home. Let the person who loves you actually love you, the version of you that includes the losses and the fears and the days you do not want to play. They have been waiting for this version. The performed version has been keeping them at a distance for years.

The relationship is not weaker than this. The relationship is much stronger than this. You have been underestimating it. You have been protecting them from the truth of your work because you assumed they could not handle it. They can handle it. They have been waiting for you to trust them enough to try.

Trust them.

Bring the loss home. Bring the fear home. Bring the version of you that is too tired to talk and let them sit with you in the silence.

The relationship will hold.

This is one of the actual gifts of the long path. The work that you thought was costing the relationship turns out to be the work that, if done honestly with another person, builds the relationship into something neither of you could have built alone. The variance becomes the curriculum for the relationship the way it became the curriculum for your play. The two of you become, over years, people who can sit through anything together.

But it requires the bringing-home.

Stop hiding.

They are not the audience. They are the home.

Walk through the door as the actual you and let them love what walks through.



## THE THREE A.M. HATRED

### THE THREE A.M. HATRED

I want to talk about the hour when you hate the game.

Not the small frustration after a losing session. Not the ordinary tilt that everyone has and everyone gets over. The other thing. The thing that arrives at three in the morning, sometimes, after a session that has gone too long, in the moment when the heat lamp of the screen has been on your face for too many hours and the chair has cut into your back in the same place for too many years and the next hand has just come and you do not want to play it.

In that moment you know, with a clarity you do not have at any other time, that you hate this.

You hate the cards. You hate the room. You hate the chair. You hate the people on the other end of the screen, including the ones you have been friendly with for years. You hate the fact that you have spent another night doing this when you could have been doing anything else with the precious finite life you were given. You hate the version of yourself who keeps showing up to do this. You hate the version of yourself who is, even now, considering loading another table.

Most of all you hate that the hating is not the kind of hating that lets you stop. It is the kind of hating that you have had before, and that has passed, and that will pass again, and that will be back. You hate that you know it will be back. You hate the cycle. You hate that you are inside a relationship that produces this hour, regularly, and that you have not figured out how to leave the relationship.

This is the three a.m. hatred. Most serious players have it. Almost no one writes about it.

I want to write about it.

The first thing to say is that the hatred is honest. It is not a malfunction. It is not a sign that something is wrong with you. It is a real signal from a real part of you that has been quiet most of the day, and that comes forward at the hour when your defenses have thinned, and that says, with no varnish, *this is hurting me*.

Most of you spends most of its time defending against this signal. The reasons are obvious. You have made commitments. You have built a career. You have a partner who depends on the income. You have an identity that is wrapped up in being a player. You cannot, without massive cost, take the signal seriously. So you don't. You log off, you sleep, you wake up, you tell yourself you were just tired, you get back to work.

This is what almost everyone does. It works, in the sense that you keep playing. It does not work, in the sense that the signal is not going away. Every time you ignore it, it gets louder for the next time. Eventually it becomes a presence that you live with. The three a.m. hatred starts arriving at one a.m., then at midnight, then at any time of the day. You start dreading the session before it begins. You start procrastinating loading. You start finding reasons not to play. The hatred has crossed a threshold. It is no longer just a late-night visitor. It is a roommate.

This is where most players are when they finally decide to quit. They quit because the roommate has become unbearable. They sell the dream and buy a normal life and they tell themselves that the wisdom of the decision was always obvious in retrospect. Sometimes this is the right decision. I am not going to tell you it never is. Some people are not built for this work, and the three a.m. hatred is information they should listen to.

But I want to make a distinction here that almost never gets made.

There are two kinds of three a.m. hatred, and they are very different, and the strategy for each is different.

The first kind is the hatred of the game *itself*. You no longer love it. You no longer find it interesting. The puzzles do not engage you. The hands do not move you. The reads have lost their pleasure. The whole apparatus has become a means to an end, and the end is no longer worth the means. This kind of hatred is rare. When it is real, you should listen to it. Quit. Find something you love. The years will not come back, and the years left should not be spent in a profession that has lost all of its meaning to you.

The second kind is much more common, and it gets confused with the first kind, and the confusion causes most of the people who quit at the wrong time to quit.

The second kind is not the hatred of the game. It is the hatred of *the way you have been playing the game*. There is a difference, and the difference matters.

You have been playing the game in a way that is hurting you. The hours have been wrong. The stakes have been wrong. The volume has been wrong. The relationship to results has been wrong. The lifestyle around the work has been wrong. The accumulated wrongness has been costing you, slowly, in ways that compound, and the three a.m. hatred is the body-and-mind's report on the accumulated

cost. The report is not about the game. The report is about the way the game has been being lived. You have been confusing the report with a verdict on the game itself, and the confusion has made you doubt the wrong thing.

This is the strike. Not gentle. The thing you have been hating is not what you have been thinking you were hating. You have been hating the way you have constructed your relationship with poker, and you have been blaming poker for the construction. Poker did not construct it. You did. You built the schedule. You set the volume. You picked the stakes. You kept up the pace that the body and mind cannot sustain. You ignored the small signals for years. The game does not know any of this. The game has been the same game throughout. What changed is the way you have been doing it.

This is good news, even though it does not sound like it. If the hatred were of the game itself, there would be nothing to do but quit. Because the hatred is mostly of the *construction*, the construction can be changed, and the hatred can lift, and the love of the game can come back.

I have done this. I will not pretend it was easy. There were years where the construction was so wrong that the three a.m. hatred was almost a daily presence. I thought I had to quit. I told my partner I was going to quit. I made plans for what I would do instead. The plans were sensible and depressing.

What I did instead was change the construction. Slowly. Cut the volume by a third. Cut the late-night sessions entirely. Set a hard end time. Took two days off a week, no exceptions. Stopped grinding for the bankroll-building reasons that had been driving the volume in the first place. Took a stake-down to a place where the work felt clean. Started exercising. Stopped checking results obsessively. Reduced my exposure to the noise of the poker world.

The hatred lifted. Not all at once. Over months. The love came back. Not the original love I had at twenty-two — that love is gone for everyone, eventually, and good riddance to it, because it was naive — but a new love, quieter, more durable, more aware of what the game is and what it costs. I came to love the game in the second way, which is the way you can love something for the rest of your life.

This is the open part. There is a kind of love for the game that survives the three a.m. hatred. It is not the original love. It is the love that has been through the hatred and come out the other side. It is more honest. It does not need the game to be what it is not. It loves the game for what the game is, including the things about the game that are hard.

To get there, you have to do two things that almost no one does.

The first is to actually look at the construction. Honestly. Without flinching. The schedule, the stakes, the vol-

ume, the lifestyle, the relationship between the work and the rest of your life. All of it. Most players cannot do this because the looking is uncomfortable. The construction has been propping up things that are not all about poker – your identity, your sense of legitimacy, your relationship with money, your way of relating to your partner. To change the construction is to disturb all of these. So most players keep the construction unchanged and try to manage the hatred by other means. The other means do not work. The construction is the issue.

The second is to actually be willing to lose money in the short term to fix the construction. This is the harder one. The wrong construction is often profitable in the short term. The right construction often costs you money for a while as you adjust. Most players cannot accept this. They want the change to be free. The change is not free. The change costs you whatever the wrong construction was earning for you that the right construction is not yet earning. You pay this cost up front, and you receive, eventually, the return – which is the hatred lifting, the love coming back, and a sustainable practice that you can do for thirty more years instead of the five years the wrong construction would have given you before it broke you.

The math is in favor of the change. Most players do not run the math, because running the math requires ad-

mitting that the wrong construction has been wrong for a long time, and the admission is humiliating.

Admit it anyway. The humiliation is small. The years it buys you are large.

I want to close with something I came to know after my own three a.m. years.

The hatred that arrives at three in the morning is, in some way, the most loyal part of you. It is the part that has been keeping watch on the cost of your life. It has been counting things you have refused to count. It has been adding up the cost of the hours you have given that the bankroll did not pay for. It has been watching the relationship erode. It has been watching the body slow down. It has been watching the parts of you that have nothing to do with poker get smaller. And at three in the morning, when the rest of you is too tired to defend, it comes forward and tells you what it has been seeing.

You can hate it for telling you. Most of us do, at first.

You can also thank it.

It has been trying to save your life. It has been doing this by hating, because hating is the only language you understand on the matter. If it spoke gently, you would dismiss it. If it spoke softly, you would not hear it. So it speaks brutally, at three in the morning, in a voice you cannot ignore. *This is hurting you. Stop. Change something.*

When you finally listen — when you finally make the changes the voice has been demanding — the voice quiets. It does not go away entirely. It comes back when the construction starts going wrong again. It is your alarm system. It is the part of you that knows what the rest of you has refused to know.

Listen to it.

The hatred is not your enemy.

The hatred is the part of you that loves you most.

# VI

## THE HAND YOU KNEW WAS WRONG

There is a different kind of hand that haunts.

Not the cooler. Not the bad beat. The other one. The one where the read was right there, in front of you, and you reached past it. The one where some part of you, in real time, knew that the call was wrong, knew that the bluff was a level off, knew that the line did not match the player you were against — and you did it anyway. You saw yourself doing it. You were inside the hand, watching the wrong play happen, and you could not stop it.

The chips moved. The hand was over. The session continued. But you have been carrying the hand around for weeks, in a different way than you carry the cooler. The

cooler hurts because the universe was unfair. This one hurts because *you* were the one who was unfair, to your own better knowing, and the better knowing was right there the whole time.

This is the bad beat that the bad beat books do not include. The self-betrayal hand. The hand where you cannot blame the river because the river had nothing to do with it. You did this. Some version of you, with full awareness of what was happening, took the bad action.

I want to sit inside this with you, because this hand is more important than the cooler, and almost no one treats it that way.

The cooler tells you what the universe is. The self-betrayal hand tells you what you are.

What is happening in the moment of self-betrayal? Why does the better knowing not win?

Most explanations of this are too quick. People say *tilt*. People say *ego*. People say *level*. These words are not wrong, but they are placeholders. They label the symptom and skip the structure underneath.

The structure underneath is this. The better knowing — the read, the recognition, the part of you that saw what was actually happening — is one voice in a committee. The committee has other voices. There is the voice that wants to be shown right. There is the voice that does not want to look weak in front of the table. There is the voice that has

been losing for an hour and needs this hand to even out. There is the voice that has decided you are running into hands and that you are owed a bluff catch. There is the voice that just wants the session to end and that will take any decisive action to get there. The committee is loud. The better knowing is one quieter voice among the louder ones.

In most hands, the committee does not show up. The play is routine. The better knowing handles it without competition. The hand happens cleanly.

In the hands that matter — the hands with stress, with size, with social pressure, with fatigue — the committee shows up. The voices argue. The loudest voice usually wins. The loudest voice is rarely the better knowing. The better knowing is, by its nature, quiet. It does not need to be loud, because it is right. The wrong voices are loud because being loud is how they win against being right.

You have been losing this argument, in specific spots, for years. The losing is the self-betrayal. The hand where you reached past the read is the documentary evidence. You have been playing not against the opponent in those moments. You have been playing against your own better knowing. The opponent was incidental. The hand was a confrontation between the parts of yourself that wanted different things, and the part that wanted the wrong thing was louder.

Now the strike, which I want to land hard because you have been protecting yourself from it.

The hand was not a mistake.

I know it looks like a mistake. I know it is correctly classified as a mistake by every poker analysis tool. I know your coach would call it a mistake. But for our purposes here – for the work this book is trying to do – the framing of *mistake* is letting you off the hook in a way that prevents the actual learning.

A mistake is something you did because you did not know better. The hand we are talking about is not that. You knew better. The better knowing was present. You watched yourself ignore it. This is not a mistake. This is a choice. The choice was made by a part of you that wanted something other than the right play. The wanting was real. You have been pretending it was not real because admitting it requires admitting that there are parts of you that are working against your own success.

The bad beats book has to name this clearly because no one else will. Some of your worst hands are not mistakes. They are decisions made by the parts of you that are not aligned with the parts of you that want to win. The misalignment is the actual problem. The hand is the symptom. Until you address the misalignment, you will keep playing this hand, in different forms, for the rest of your career.

What does the misalignment look like, specifically?

Different for each player. But there are patterns.

There is the *prove I'm not a coward* misalignment. You have been folding too much in your own head, real or imagined, and you reach a hand where you can demonstrate that you are not a coward, and the better knowing says fold and the proving-self says call, and the proving-self wins. You make the hero call. You lose. The proving-self is satisfied — at least the table cannot say you are weak — even though the bankroll has just lost a buy-in.

There is the *I deserve this hand* misalignment. You have been losing for an hour, two hours, a week. You reach a spot where you have a real hand, or you think you do. The better knowing says the action does not match a worse hand here. The deserving-self says the universe owes you this one. The deserving-self wins. You call. You lose. The deserving-self is mollified — at least you tried to collect what you were owed — even though the universe does not have an account with you and was never going to pay.

There is the *please end the session* misalignment. You have been at the table too long. You want to leave. The leaving feels like quitting. So you take an action that resolves the session decisively in one direction or the other. You bet too big. You call too light. Either way, the hand will be over and the session will probably end. The better knowing says wait. The end-it-self says now. The end-it-self wins. The session ends. The chips are gone.

Each of these has the same structure. A part of you that wants something other than the right play. A better knowing that gets overruled. A hand that haunts you afterward, not because you didn't know, but because you knew and overrode.

The work is not to silence these other parts of yourself. They are real and they are not going anywhere. The work is to know them well enough that you can see them coming. The work is to recognize the *flavor* of the impulse before it becomes an action.

The proving-self has a flavor. The deserving-self has a flavor. The end-it-self has a flavor. They feel different from the better knowing. The better knowing is quiet, neutral, almost bored. The other voices are urgent, charged, hot. They feel like *I have to do this now*. The better knowing never feels like *I have to do this now*. It just sees what is, and notes what should be done, and does not insist.

When you can recognize the flavor in real time — when you can notice, in the half-second between thought and action, *this is the proving-self talking, this is not the read* — the action stops being automatic. You can hold it. You can let it pass. You can go back to the better knowing and ask it what to do, and act on its quieter answer.

This is not easy. You will get it wrong many times. The other voices have been winning these arguments for a long time. They are good at it. They will, sometimes, disguise

themselves as the better knowing — they will tell you they are the read, they will dress up as recognition. You will be fooled. You will play the wrong hand. You will recognize, afterward, that you were fooled. This is part of the work. The recognition is what builds the discrimination.

Over years, the discrimination sharpens. You start to notice the flavors more quickly. You start to catch the proving-self before it bets. You start to fold the marginal river call you would have made for ego. You start to value-bet the hand that the deserving-self had been turning into a check. The play improves, not because of new strategy, but because the misalignment has been addressed at the level where it lived.

This is one of the deepest things the long path teaches. The play is not a function of the strategy. The play is a function of the player. The strategy lives on top of the player. If the player is misaligned, the strategy gets distorted at the moment of action. If the player is aligned, even a flawed strategy executes cleanly. The work is the alignment. The alignment is the work.

Now the open part.

There is a place to play from that does not have the misalignment. Not because the parts of you have been silenced — they cannot be silenced, and trying to silence them only drives them underground — but because the parts of you have been integrated. They have been heard.

They have stopped needing to win the argument by ambush.

This integration takes years. It is not a technique. It is the slow work of becoming a less divided person. The hand where you reach past the read is, in a sense, an audit of how divided you currently are. The more those hands, the more division. The fewer those hands, the more integration. You can use the hands as a measurement of your interior progress, which is a more accurate measurement than your bankroll because the bankroll has variance and the interior does not.

The integrated player has very few self-betrayal hands. He still has them — no one is fully integrated — but they are rare. When they happen, he notices quickly, names the part of himself that took the wrong action, and continues without internal drama. He is not divided against himself in the way most players are. The hands he plays are the hands he means. The chips that move are the chips he meant to move.

This is a quieter way to live. It is also, incidentally, much more profitable, because the leak that the misalignment was creating has been closed. The strategy you have been studying is finally able to actually execute, because the player executing it is no longer at war with himself.

The next time you play a hand you knew was wrong — and you will, soon, because you are in the middle of

the work — sit with it. Not as a mistake. As information.  
*Which part of me made that play? What was it wanting?*  
*Why did the better knowing lose?*

The answers will not come immediately. They will come over weeks. Each answer is a piece of integration. Each piece makes the next self-betrayal slightly less likely.

You are not a player who made a mistake.

You are a player who is still learning to be one person at the table instead of a committee.

The committee will quiet, in time.

The better knowing will become harder to override.

The hand you knew was wrong will stop being a haunting and start being a teacher.

Continue.

# VII

## THE TALENT QUESTION

We are going to walk into one of the rooms most poker players keep locked.

The room is the question of whether you are actually good.

You have been avoiding this question for a long time. You have been avoiding it skillfully, with an architecture of distractions that all serve to prevent you from arriving at it directly. You study, partly because studying is how players improve, and partly because studying postpones the question — as long as you are still studying, the verdict is not in. You move stakes carefully, partly because bankroll management is real, and partly because the controlled climb prevents you from ever being in a sample large enough to

reveal what you actually are. You take breaks at the right time. You leave games that are uncomfortable. You curate your career in a hundred small ways that have the effect, often invisible to you, of never actually putting your edge on the line in a way that would settle the question.

The question, asked plainly, is: *do I have what it takes?*

You cannot answer this question. No one can. The honest answer is *I don't know*, and you have been protecting yourself from this answer for years by making sure the question never gets asked clearly enough to require it.

This is the bad beat that does not happen to you in any specific hand. It happens to you over years. It is the slow accumulation of an evasion that has shaped your career without your noticing. You do not see it because the architecture of avoidance is what you have been calling *being a serious player*. You think you are doing the work. Some of it is the work. Some of it is the avoidance dressed as the work.

I want to walk into this room with you, because almost no one will, and because the room is much less terrifying once you are inside it.

Let me start with what you have been afraid of.

You have been afraid that if you actually tested it — really tested it, in a sample large enough and against opponents tough enough that the result would mean something — the test would come back saying *not enough*. You

have been protecting yourself from this verdict because the verdict would, you believe, undo years of your life. The years would have been wasted. The identity you have built around being-on-the-path would collapse. The version of yourself you have been would be exposed as something other than what you said it was.

So you do not test. You stay in the spots where the test is ambiguous. You blame variance for the losses, which is sometimes true and sometimes a way of keeping the question open. You attribute the wins to skill, which is sometimes true and sometimes a way of feeding the version of yourself that needs feeding. The career proceeds in a haze of plausible deniability. The deniability is the protection.

This is not unique to you. This is what almost everyone does in any field where the talent question is unresolved. The musicians who do not audition. The writers who do not submit. The athletes who train forever and never compete. The whole world is full of people who have built sophisticated lives around not finding out. Poker, with its long sample sizes and its mathematically real concept of variance, has more elegant tools for avoidance than most fields. We use them.

Now the strike.

Some of you are not as good as you think you are.

I am sorry. I am not trying to be cruel. I am trying to do what almost no other writer in this field will do, which

is to say the actual sentence out loud, because the unsaid version of it is doing more damage than the said version possibly could.

You have been carrying, for years, an unconscious belief that you might be one of the great ones. The belief is not stated in those words. It is more like a low background assumption that the ceiling is high. You compare yourself, secretly, to the players you admire. You imagine, occasionally, the version of your career where the breakthrough comes. You watch interviews of the players who broke through and you map their qualities onto yourself. You think: *I have those things too. The path is open to me.*

The path may not be open to you. The path may have been open to you and may have closed. The path may never have been open to you. There is, statistically, no way for everyone who picks up the game to be one of the great ones. Most of us are not. Most of us, by the math of it, are doing this for reasons other than greatness. We just have not admitted to ourselves what those other reasons are.

Sit with this for a minute. I am not telling you to give up. I am telling you to stop carrying the *might-be-great* fantasy that has been driving the avoidance. The fantasy has been costing you. It has been pushing you to overplay your bankroll, to spend more on coaching than you could afford, to skip vacations to grind, to delay the parts

of life that have nothing to do with poker — all in service of the breakthrough that the fantasy keeps promising. The fantasy has been a tax. You have been paying it without seeing it.

When you finally let the fantasy go — when you accept that you might be a solid mid-stakes player and never anything more, and that this might be all you ever are at the table — something strange happens. The avoidance loosens. You can finally look at the question of what you actually are, because the answer no longer threatens to undo your life.

And here is the part that almost no one tells you. The answer, when you finally look, is almost always: *good enough to keep doing this if I want to.*

Not great. Not breakthrough. Not the dream. But good enough. You have an edge. The edge is real. The edge will support a sustainable practice if you treat it sustainably. The edge will not make you famous. The edge will not put you in the documentaries. The edge will let you sit at this table for the rest of your life, working at this craft, and being paid enough by it to make the work worth doing.

This is the actual answer, for most of you. It is much more humble than the fantasy you have been carrying. It is also much more livable than the verdict you have been afraid of. You are not great. You are also not fraud. You are a working player. The working player is a real thing. It is

not the dream. It is sustainable, and the sustainable thing is what gets you the years that the dream was supposed to deliver.

The reason most players cannot accept this is that the working player is not the player they wanted to be. The working player has a normal career. The working player goes to bed at a reasonable hour. The working player has a partner and a life and a body that gets exercise. The working player does not blow up his life chasing the breakthrough that the fantasy demanded. The working player is, in the eyes of the fantasy, a sellout — someone who has given up on greatness for the consolation prize of mere competence.

This is the verdict the fantasy delivers on the working player. It is the wrong verdict. The working player is the actual achievement. The breakthrough, when it does happen for the rare players it happens to, is mostly luck on top of competence anyway. The competence is the part that was earned. The breakthrough is a feature of variance plus opportunity plus things that the player did not control.

You can stop chasing the breakthrough. You can keep the competence. The competence is enough.

Now the open part, because this chapter cannot end in resignation.

The talent question has been the wrong question.

I mean this carefully. The question *do I have what it takes* was constructed to deliver one of two answers — yes or no — and to make the rest of your life depend on which answer came back. *Yes* and you go on and become the great one. *No* and you should have quit years ago. The whole architecture has been designed around the binary verdict.

The binary verdict is a fiction. Real lives do not have binary verdicts. Real lives have continuums, and most of us live somewhere in the middle of the continuum, and the work of a real life is figuring out how to live well in the middle, not how to escape into the top end through some breakthrough that the binary verdict was supposed to ratify.

The question that actually matters, when you finally walk into this room, is not *do I have what it takes*. It is *do I want to be doing this*.

And the second question has nothing to do with the first.

You can be modestly talented and want to be doing this for the rest of your life. The wanting is enough. You can be highly talented and not want to be doing this at all. The talent does not save you. The two are independent variables, and the wanting is the one that determines whether you should keep playing.

If you want to be doing this — if there is something in the work that calls you, that satisfies you, that you would miss if it were gone — then keep doing it. The talent is sufficient. The talent is sufficient because *enough* is sufficient. You do not need to be great. You need to be in the work. The work is its own reason.

If you do not want to be doing this — if you have noticed, in the quiet moments, that the calling is gone, that the work has become an obligation you are honoring out of inertia, that the version of yourself who would miss it has thinned out — then the talent is also irrelevant. Even if you are talented, you should consider stopping. The talent is not enough to sustain a life if the wanting is absent. You have other gifts. Other things will call you. Listen.

This is the question you should have been asking. Not *am I good enough*, but *do I want this*. The first question has been a decoy. The second is the one with information in it.

When you make this turn — when you stop interrogating your talent and start interrogating your wanting — the talent question dissolves. It does not get answered. It gets retired. The room you walked into turns out to have a door on the other side, and the door leads to a different question entirely, and the new question is one you can actually answer.

You know whether you want this. You have always known. You have been hiding it under the talent question because the talent question was an excuse to keep going — *I might be great, so I have to keep trying* — or an excuse to quit — *I'm not great, so why bother*. Both directions of the excuse have been ways of not facing the wanting.

Face the wanting now.

Do you want this?

If yes — for whatever reason, even reasons you cannot fully articulate — then keep playing. Your talent is enough. It always was.

If no — and the no will be quiet, almost shy, almost embarrassed by itself — then begin the work of slowly leaving. Not in panic. Not in a single decisive day. Over months. With grace. The leaving is also a craft.

But the talent question — the one you have been carrying for years — is the wrong question. Put it down.

There is no verdict.

There never was.

There is only the wanting and the not-wanting, and you are the only person who can read which one is yours.

# VIII

## THE YEARS

There is a question that arrives, usually in the middle of the night, that you do not let yourself ask in daylight.

The question is whether you have wasted your life.

You have given a long stretch of your years to this game. You can count the years. They are real. They are not coming back. You spent them at screens and in card rooms and on the road and inside the strange hours that the work requires. You did this when other people were doing other things. You did this instead of having children, or you had children and saw less of them than you should have. You did this instead of building a normal career, or you tried to do both and one or the other suffered. You did this instead of becoming a person whose Friday

night looks like the Friday night of the people you went to school with.

These are facts. There is no way to argue with them. You did spend the years on poker. The other things you might have done were not done.

The question, in the middle of the night, is whether the trade was worth it.

I want to write about this honestly, because I think most writing on this question is either dishonest in the direction of *of course it was worth it* or dishonest in the direction of *you should have done something else with your life*. Both are dishonest because both are answers. The honest position is that the question does not have an answer, and the work is not to find an answer but to develop a different relationship with the unanswered question.

Let me try to explain.

The question *did I waste my years* is asked by a part of you that is using a particular metric to evaluate the years. The metric is comparison. It is comparing the life you actually have to a counterfactual life you might have had if you had made different choices. The counterfactual life is not real. It exists nowhere. It is constructed by the part of you asking the question, using materials borrowed from observation of other people's lives, plus your own imagination of what your life would have been like if you had taken a different path.

The counterfactual is, almost by definition, more polished than your actual life. The actual life has all of its flaws on display, because you are inside it. The counterfactual life has no flaws on display, because it does not exist and so cannot be examined for flaws. The comparison is rigged. It will always come out unfavorable to the actual life. This is not because your actual life is bad. It is because counterfactual lives are not subject to the same scrutiny as real lives, and the unscrutinized version of anything looks better than the scrutinized version of anything.

Most people who feel they have wasted their lives have done this comparison without noticing they were doing it. They are not actually evaluating their lives against a real alternative. They are evaluating their lives against a fantasy, and the fantasy will always win.

Notice this. The next time the *did I waste my years* question arrives in the middle of the night, ask the follow-up question: *what specifically would I have done instead?* You will find that the answer is vague. Some general gesture at *a normal life*, or *finishing my degree*, or *building a career in some other field*. Press harder. *What specific career? Doing what for a living? Where? With whom? What would I be eating tonight in this counterfactual life? What would I be worried about?* The answers thin out. The counterfactual cannot hold up to specific questioning, because

it does not exist. It is a wash of *not this*, and *not this* is not a life. It is a complaint dressed up as an alternative.

This is the strike. The question is being asked dishonestly. The part of you asking it is not actually weighing two real options. It is suffering inside the only life you actually have, and dressing the suffering up as a comparison to give it more weight. The comparison is a way of making the suffering feel justified. It is not actually a verdict on your years.

If you can see this — really see it, not just nod at it intellectually — the question loses some of its power. It still arrives. The middle-of-the-night does not stop coming. But you can hold the question differently. You can notice that it is being asked, you can notice the comparison machinery underneath it, and you can decline to let the comparison machinery deliver a verdict that the comparison is not actually qualified to deliver.

Now I want to say something more difficult, because the chapter cannot stop here.

Some of the years probably *were* wasted.

Not in the way the middle-of-the-night question implies — not in the sense that you should have done something else with your life. In a smaller, more local sense. There were specific years inside the larger sweep of years where you were grinding for the wrong reasons, where you were chasing the wrong things, where you were work-

ing too much, or playing too tight, or in the wrong games, or in the wrong relationship to the work. Those specific years were, in a real sense, wasted — in that they did not accomplish what they could have accomplished if you had been operating differently.

This is honest. You can sit with it. *Yes. There were years where I was doing this badly.* The acknowledgment is not the same as the larger verdict that the whole of the years were wasted. The years are not all the same. Some were well-spent. Some were not. Some were both. The accurate account of your years is granular, not global.

The middle-of-the-night question collapses the granular into the global. *Did I waste my years.* All of them, in one verdict. This is intellectually lazy. The question is too big to be useful. Break it into smaller questions. *Was 2017 well-spent? Was the move to that game in 2019 a mistake? Was the year I spent grinding twelve-hour sessions productive in any deep sense?* These questions can be answered. The answers are mixed. The mixed answers are useful. The global verdict was never going to be useful, because the global verdict is too coarse a tool for examining a life.

Most of you will discover, when you do this granular examination, that the years were not as bad as the global verdict was telling you. Some periods were well-spent. Some were ambiguous. A few were genuinely wasted, in the local sense. The total is closer to a normal human life

than the catastrophic narrative the middle-of-the-night had been pushing.

You can also do something more useful with the genuinely wasted periods. You can learn from them. The years where you were doing this badly were teaching you something about how not to do it. The teaching is in you now. The years are not wasted if the teaching has been integrated. They are the cost of the lesson. The lesson, once learned, is yours for the rest of the years to come.

This reframe is not a trick. It is an actual change in how the years sit in you. The wasted years stop being a debit and become an investment. The investment was paid in suffering. The return is the wisdom you are now applying to the years that remain. Most people who have done deep work in any field have wasted years they later identified as the curriculum. The wasting was the way the wisdom was earned. The unwasted version of those same years would have produced no wisdom and you would be more naive now than you are.

This is the thing that nobody tells you in the middle of the night. Some of the wasting was the work. Some of the wasting was how you became someone who knows what you now know. There is no version of your life in which you were going to skip the wasting and arrive at the wisdom. The wisdom arrived through the wasting. The two are the same fact, viewed from different sides.

Now the open part.

There is a place to live from that does not ask the *did I waste my years* question.

The place is not a denial of the question. It is not a forced positive thinking that pretends every year was perfect. It is a deeper place than the question can reach. From this place, the years are simply the years. They happened. They are inside you now. You are made of them. The question of whether they should have happened differently is, from this place, a category error — the years cannot have happened differently because they are the precondition for the *you* asking the question. There is no version of the asker that exists separately from the years he is asking about.

This is where the brand on the cover of this book points, in its deepest form. *Loved and wanted-nothing-from* — including the years. The years are not asking you to redeem them by being one of the great players. The years are not asking you to justify them by hitting some external metric. The years are not transactional. They were lived. They are now memory. They are now the substance of who you are. They want nothing from you in return for having happened. They are loved by the larger you for having been the years they were, including the wasted parts, including the grinding, including the mistakes.

Most people will not get here easily. Most of us spend long stretches of life trying to redeem the years through some future achievement that will retroactively justify them. *If I just hit this milestone, the years will have meant something.* This never works. The achievement comes, the milestone is hit, and the years are still not retroactively justified, because the years did not need to be justified in the first place. They needed to be lived. They were lived. The justification project was a category error from the start.

When you finally let the justification project go — and this can take years inside the years — the middle-of-the-night question stops arriving as often. When it arrives, you can hold it without panic. *Did I waste my years.* The question is permitted. It does not require an answer. The years are here. You are here. Whatever they were, they are. There is no verdict to deliver, because there is no court that has jurisdiction over a single human life.

The question is asked by a part of you that has not yet accepted that you are the one who lived the years and that the living is enough. When that part accepts — slowly, over its own time — the question retires. You sleep through the night. You wake up. You play the next session. The years continue, and the new years are not measured against any counterfactual either, because the lesson has been learned.

This is one of the gifts the long path delivers. Not the answer to the question. The retirement of the question.

The two are very different. The first would have given you peace about a verdict. The second gives you peace by removing the verdict's authority.

The years were the years.

You are the years.

Continue.

# IX

## THE PERSON AT THE TABLE

There is a version of you that comes out at the table that you would not befriend in real life.

I am going to ask you to look at him.

He is not the version of you that your partner sees. He is not the version your friends see. He is not the version your mother thinks of when she thinks of you. He is the one who shows up around hour four of a session, when the cards have been doing what they have been doing, and the regulars at the table have done what they have done, and the layers of professional politeness have started to thin. He is colder than you are. He is more impatient. He is dismissive of the players he has decided are below him. He is contemptuous of mistakes he would forgive in himself.

He makes small cruel jokes in his head about the man in seat three. He rates the table by who he can take from and who he has to be careful around, and the rating has the slightly ugly quality of someone reducing other humans to instruments.

You have been pretending he is not you. You have been calling him *the table self*, or *the grinder*, or some other name that suggests he is a temporary mask you put on for work. He is not a mask. He is a part of you. He has your face and your name and he has been growing in you for years, fed by every session in which you let him out without examining what he was doing.

This is the bad beat we do not write about, because it is too embarrassing. The other bad beats happen *to* you. This one is something you have been doing.

I want to write about him because I have him too. I have spent years pretending he was not me. I have spent more years admitting he was, and the admitting was the start of being able to do something about him.

Let me describe him more specifically, because the abstract description lets you off the hook.

He is the part of you who, when a recreational player makes a bad call and rivers you, thinks something dismissive about the player's intelligence. The thought is not loud. It is fast. It is gone in a second. But it was there, and you have had it many times, and the having of it has

built a small layer of contempt that you carry around the table with you like cologne.

He is the part of you who treats the dealer worse than you would treat a stranger in any other professional context. Not abusively — you are not a monster. Just less politely. You forget to thank her on a hand. You roll your eyes when she calls a card you did not want. You leave a smaller tip after a losing session because you are quietly punishing her for being there during the loss. None of this is who you would be in a restaurant. The restaurant version of you tips well and chats with the server. The table version is meaner.

He is the part of you who watches the new player at your stake and assesses his clothes, his posture, his way of stacking chips, and forms a snap judgment about how the man is going to play. The judgment is sometimes accurate. It is also a way of dismissing him before he has done anything. The dismissing is in your eyes when you look at him. Other players notice. He notices, even if he cannot name what he is noticing.

He is the part of you who, when you have a seat in a soft game, feels a low-grade satisfaction that other players are losing money. The satisfaction is not the same as the satisfaction of winning your own money. It is the satisfaction of others being on the wrong side of the table. This

is a separate emotion. It is uglier than the satisfaction of winning. You have it more often than you have admitted.

He is the part of you who, when a friend reaches out for advice on poker, gives it grudgingly, because the friend's success would diminish your own status in some imaginary hierarchy that exists only in your head. You give the advice. The advice is okay. It is not the advice you would have given if your status were not on the line. The friend can tell. The friendship gets quietly thinner over the years, partly for this reason.

He is the part of you who, when you read a forum post by a player you do not respect, takes a small pleasure in the player's confusion, because the player's confusion is evidence that you are, by comparison, sharp. The pleasure is not joy. It is a colder feeling. It is comparative, which is to say it depends on someone else being lesser. You have come to depend on this comparison more than you would like to admit.

I could keep going. The list of small ugly things this version of you does is long. You know the list. I am not telling you anything you do not already know about him. I am only naming him, because you have been refusing to name him.

Here is the strike, and I will not soften it.

He is you. He is not the table version of you. He is one of the versions of you, and the table is the place where that

version gets the most expression, but he exists in you everywhere. He shows up in your relationships, in subtler forms. He shows up in how you talk about people behind their backs. He shows up in the small contemptuous flickers when you pass a homeless man on the street. He shows up in how you treat the people whose work you depend on but who you do not need to impress. The table is not generating him. The table is just a context where he is given more room than usual, because the ego-protective machinery of polite society has been removed there.

The reason this matters is not moral. I am not interested in shaming you. The reason this matters is practical. The version of you that he is is also the version that loses the most money. The contempt he carries is information he is broadcasting to the table about who he is. Other players read the broadcast. The broadcast tells them, accurately, that he is operating from a place of need, that he is using the contempt to feel okay about himself, that his ego is fragile enough that it requires the lessening of others to stay propped up. Players who can read this — and many players can, even if they cannot articulate it — adjust accordingly. They play him harder. They bluff him more. They value-bet thinner against him because they correctly perceive that his ego will not let him fold marginal hands when his decision can be framed as proving something to the table.

The contempt is not just a personal failing. It is a leak. The leak is large. You have been paying a literal dollar cost for the contempt for years.

This is the bad beat the contempt is producing. Not just the spiritual cost — though that is real — but the financial one. The version of you that the table sees is the version the table is exploiting. You have been giving them a target. The target is not your strategy. The target is your interior state, leaking through your face and your timing and your bet sizing. They cannot see your hand. They can see the man holding the hand. The man has been broadcasting.

What do you do about him?

You do not, as a first move, try to be a better person. The trying-to-be-a-better-person move is its own ego project. It produces a new version of you who is performing virtue at the table, which other players also read, and which has its own leaks. The performed warmth is no better than the genuine contempt. They are both costumes.

The first move is to see him without flinching.

Notice the small contempt when it arrives. *There it is again.* Don't argue with it. Don't suppress it. Don't dress it up. Just notice. *I just had a contemptuous thought about that player.* The noticing is the work. The noticing creates a small distance between you and the contempt, and inside the distance, the part of you that is doing the noticing —

which is not the contemptuous part — gets a chance to be in charge of what you do next.

This sounds simple. It is not. The contempt is fast. Most of your contemptuous thoughts have been over before you noticed them. The work of catching them in real time is the work of years. Most players never start.

But once you start, something begins to shift. The contempt does not go away. It comes up less often. The ones that come up are weaker. The ones that come up and get noticed lose their power to drive your subsequent actions. Over time, the version of you at the table starts to look more like the version of you in the rest of your life. The split heals. You become one person, instead of two.

This is the deepest work in the book. It is also the work that no one will help you with, because no one in poker culture talks about it. The poker community celebrates the contemptuous version of you. The contemptuous version is *crushing*. The contemptuous version has *the killer instinct*. The contemptuous version is the one in the documentaries, eyes hard, smile thin. We have built a culture around the version of him we should have been quietly trying to dismantle.

I am not telling you to be soft. The work is not to become a softer player. The strongest players I have known have been remarkably warm humans, and the warmth was load-bearing in their game, not opposed to it. They were

not contemptuous of their opponents. They were focused. Focus and contempt are different. Focus is on the play. Contempt is on the player. Focus does not have a moral component. Contempt does. The contempt-free player is more focused, not less, because none of his attention is being spent on the comparison-and-dismissal machinery the contempt requires.

Drop the contempt. Keep the focus. Watch the play sharpen.

Now the open part, which is also the love part.

The version of you that has been showing up at the table is not the only version available. There is another version, and you have met him, briefly, in some of your best sessions. He is calm. He is curious about the players. He is genuinely interested in what they are doing and why. He is not ranking them. He is reading them. Reading and ranking are different. Reading is information-gathering. Ranking is ego-organizing.

This other version of you is what you actually are when the contempt is not running. He is not new. He has been in you the whole time. The contemptuous version was a costume he was wearing because he believed the costume was required for the work. The costume is not required. The work can be done without it. It is, in fact, done better without it, but the better-done is almost beside the point. The point is that the costume has been costing you some-

thing larger than money. It has been costing you the integration of the person you are at the table with the person you are everywhere else.

When you take the costume off — slowly, over months and years — the integration happens. You stop being two people. You become one. The one is steadier. The one is more present. The one is more accurately readable as a person, because there is no discrepancy between the surface and the underneath. Other people respond to the integration without knowing why. The relationships in your life thicken. The play improves. The sleep improves.

You have been wearing the costume for so long that it feels like skin. It is not skin. It is a costume. You can take it off. You will be okay underneath it.

The person you are at the table can be the person you would befriend in real life.

Most of us will never get all the way there. The costume is sticky. It comes off slowly. Some of it stays on for years even after we have noticed it.

But every small noticing is a small piece of integration. Every contemptuous thought caught in real time is one less brick in the wall between the table-you and the rest-of-life-you. Over a long enough stretch, the wall starts to thin. You start, occasionally, to be one person at the table.

This is the deeper bad beat the contempt has been producing. Not the dollars. The split. The split has been cost-

ing you the ability to be one person, in a culture that does not want you to be one, at a table that has been training you for years to be two.

You can stop training.

Today's session can be the first one where you do not put on the costume. You will wear bits of it anyway. That is fine. You will catch yourself. You will notice. The noticing is the start.

The person you would befriend is in there.

He has been waiting for you to invite him to the table.

Invite him.

# X

## THE COLD COFFEE

I want to write about something almost too small to write about.

The cold coffee at hour seven of a session.

You made it at hour two. You took two sips. You meant to drink the rest. You did not. The cup has been sitting next to your laptop, going slowly cold, for five hours. You are aware of it in a peripheral way. You will not drink it now. You will not get up to make a new one. You will keep playing.

This is one image. There are many like it. The take-out container with food you ordered and forgot to eat. The phone call you did not return. The text from your mother you saw three days ago. The walk you said you would take

after the session that you did not take. The vitamin you forgot at noon. The dentist appointment you postponed twice. The friend who reached out a month ago who you still have not gotten back to. The piece of laundry that has been in the dryer for two days.

Each of these is too small to matter. None of them is dramatic. None of them is the kind of thing you can tell a story about. Together they constitute most of the cost of the way you have been living.

I want to write about them as a category, because the category does not have a name in the poker literature, and the absence of a name is part of why the category does badly by you.

Call them the small erosions.

The small erosions are not the bad beats that the river deals you. They are the bad beats you deal yourself, every day, by the slow accumulation of small things you let fall. Each small thing is, in isolation, fine. The cold coffee does not matter. The unanswered text does not matter. The skipped walk does not matter. But the pattern matters. The pattern is what your life looks like, and the pattern has been quietly degrading for years.

You may have noticed, at some point in the last year, that your apartment is slightly less clean than it used to be. That you have eaten the same kind of takeout four times this week. That the gym membership you were pay-

ing for has gone unused for two months. That the doctor's appointment you have been meaning to make is still not made. None of these is a crisis. Together they are the texture of a life that is letting things drop.

This is what we mean, when we look at it honestly, by *grinding*. The grinding does not look like one big sacrifice. It looks like a thousand small things you are not getting to. The grinding is not the hours at the table. The grinding is the hours that should have been spent on the rest of your life that have been given over to the table. The cost is not on the bankroll. The cost is on everything else.

The strike here is direct. You have been calling this *dedication*. It is not dedication. It is neglect. There is a difference, and the difference matters.

Dedication is the focused commitment of resources to a high-priority task, accepting the cost in lower-priority tasks. The accepting is conscious. The cost is named. The trade-off is examined.

Neglect is the unconscious slide of resources toward a comfortable activity, accepting the cost in everything else without naming it. The accepting is not chosen. The cost is hidden. The trade-off is never examined.

You have been telling yourself you are doing the first thing. You have actually been doing the second. The session that ran four hours longer than you planned was not dedication. It was the path of least resistance. The hours

were given to the screen because the screen was easier than getting up and doing the dishes, and the screen had cards that gave you small bursts of feedback that the dishes could not give. You stayed because staying was easier than leaving, and the staying was framed in your head as *grinding*, and the framing made the easier thing feel virtuous.

This is uncomfortable to read. I know. I have done it for years.

The reason it matters — the reason this chapter exists — is that the small erosions are eating the part of your life that the grinding was supposed to be funding. You have been working hard at the table to pay for a life. The life has been getting smaller while you worked. You will arrive at the milestone and find that the milestone is sitting on top of an apartment that is not clean and a body that has not seen a doctor and a friendship that has not been maintained and a relationship that is full of small unspoken neglects. The milestone, once arrived at, will not repair these. The milestone is just a milestone. The life around it has been decaying while you grinded toward it.

This is the actual bad beat that grinding has been producing. Not the bankroll cost. The life cost.

The body is the most concrete version of this. We talked about the body in the last book. I will not repeat the body chapter here. I will only say that the body has been keeping a ledger of every cold coffee, every skipped walk, ev-

ery late-night session, every meal eaten standing up. The ledger does not forgive easily. The body will, at some point in your forties or fifties, present you with the ledger and ask you to settle it. The settling is much more expensive than the small acts of care that would have prevented the ledger from accumulating in the first place. You can settle in advance, every day, by drinking the coffee and walking and sleeping and eating dinner sitting down. Or you can settle in arrears, in your fifties, in a doctor's office, where the cost is in things you cannot trade back for.

This is not advice. This is just description. You know all of this. I am only naming what you have been not-naming.

What is the way through?

The way through is small. Almost insultingly small. You drink the coffee. You eat the meal. You go for the walk. You answer the text. You schedule the appointment. You do the laundry. You take the night off you said you would take. Each act is too small to feel like progress. Each act is exactly what progress looks like.

Most players do not do this because the acts are too small to feel meaningful. They want to do something dramatic. They want to overhaul their life. They want a new system, a new schedule, a new self. The new self is supposed to be the one who does these small things automatically. The new self never arrives, because the new self was supposed to be the result of the small things, and the small

things are not being done because the small self does not feel meaningful enough to do.

Drop the new self. Be the small self who does the small things. The small self will become, over time, a self you would not recognize from where you currently sit. The transformation is in the small things. There is no other path to it.

Now the open part.

The way you treat the small things is the way you are.

I mean this carefully. You think the small things are minor compared to the big things, and the big things are who you are, and the small things are just maintenance. This is wrong. The small things are who you are. The big things are mostly performances. The way you treat the cold coffee is closer to the truth of your life than the way you played the big tournament.

The cold coffee was a small relationship between you and yourself. You made the coffee for yourself, an hour ago, as an act of small care. You planned to drink it. The drinking was an act of receiving the care. The cup sitting cold for five hours is the failure of the receiving. You made care. You did not let yourself receive it. You went on to other things. The care congealed in the cup.

This pattern is what your life looks like, in the small. You are constantly making small offerings of care to yourself, and you are constantly failing to receive them. The

exercise you scheduled. The time off you planned. The dinner you bought. Each is a small offering. Each is being declined by the part of you that is too busy *grinding* to receive it.

If you could let yourself receive the small offerings — drink the coffee, eat the meal, take the time off — you would notice that the rest of your life would change. Not dramatically. In the way that small things accumulate into large things over years. The body would feel different. The relationships would feel different. The grinding would feel different, because you would be doing it from a body that was being cared for instead of a body that was being run into the ground.

This is the deeper teaching of the small erosions. The small erosions are not the cost of the work. They are the place where the work has been hiding from the work. The actual work — the hard work, the work that takes place outside the room with the screen — is the work of treating yourself, in small ways, as if you mattered. The grinding has been a way of avoiding this harder work. The grinding offers measurable feedback, in dollars, that the small care does not offer. So you have been doing the easier hard thing instead of the harder small thing.

The path turns, eventually, on this. The players who keep going for thirty years are the players who learned to drink the coffee. The players who burned out at five

years did not. There is no other variable that is more predictive. The grinding is downstream of the care. The care is upstream of everything.

Drink the coffee.

Eat the meal.

Walk after the session.

Answer the text.

The cup that has been sitting next to you for five hours — get up now, pour it out, make a new one, and drink it before it gets cold this time. Then come back to the table.

This is not a digression from the work. This is the work.

The work was always this small.

# XI

## THE QUIET SUNDAY

There is a feeling that arrives on Sunday evening that almost no one names.

It is the small dread of the week ahead.

You have been free, more or less, on Saturday and Sunday. You have done other things. You have seen people. You have read a book or watched a thing or taken a long walk. The session-week has been on pause. By Sunday evening, the pause is ending. The week is reassembling itself in the back of your mind. The schedule is coming into focus. The Monday session is no longer a hypothetical. It is approaching.

In the moment of the approaching, something tightens in your chest.

You may not name it. Most people do not. They feel a small heaviness around eight or nine on Sunday and they attribute it to whatever — *I am tired, I had a busy weekend, I should have rested more*. The attribution is wrong. The heaviness is not generic. The heaviness is the body's response to the upcoming session-week. The body is telling you, in advance, that what is coming is a strain.

You have probably been having this feeling for years. You have probably been ignoring it for years, because the alternative — taking the feeling seriously — would require examining a life that you have built around the assumption that the strain is acceptable.

I want to take the feeling seriously here.

The Sunday evening dread is not about Sunday. It is about Monday through whatever-day-you-stop. It is about the relationship between your weeks and your life. It is about the question of whether the work you have organized your life around has become something you dread the start of, week after week, while telling yourself that this is normal.

It is not normal. Or it is normal in the sense that almost everyone has it, but normal in this sense is just *common*, and common is not the same as healthy.

Let me describe the dread more precisely, because the precise description is more useful than the abstract one.

It is the small tightening when you check your calendar for the week and see the sessions slotted in. It is the slight reluctance to plan things for Tuesday because you do not know what kind of state you will be in by then. It is the awareness, in the back of your mind, that by Wednesday you will be tired in a way that you cannot fix until Saturday. It is the protective habit of declining invitations for the week because you are not sure you will have the energy to honor them. It is the way the weekend ends earlier than you would like because you start, on Sunday afternoon, to brace for what is coming.

You have been bracing for years.

The bracing is the cost of the work that does not show up on any spreadsheet. The bracing is happening even when you are not at the table. The bracing is using the parts of your life that are not poker. It is leaking into the weekend. It is leaking into the morning runs you had planned. It is leaking into the dinners with people who did not deserve to receive a braced version of you.

This is the strike. The work is not contained to the hours of work. The work is everywhere in your life now, because the bracing has been seeping outward from the hours into the rest of the time. The session takes four hours. The bracing for the session takes the other twenty. You have not been working four-hour days. You have been working twenty-four-hour days, in which four of the hours

are at the screen and twenty of the hours are spent in low-grade preparation, recovery, or anxiety about the four.

If you have been wondering where your life has gone, this is most of the answer. The hours you spend not at the table are not your own. They are part of the table's gravity. The table has been holding more of your life than you signed up for it to hold.

The Sunday evening dread is the most legible sign of this. It is the moment when the gravity becomes visible. You feel it because the freedom of Saturday is falling back into the obligation of Monday, and the contrast is sharp enough to be felt. By Tuesday the contrast is gone, because you are inside the gravity again, and inside the gravity it does not feel like gravity. It only feels like life. The Sunday evening is the only moment in the week when the gravity is visible, because the contrast with the weekend is sharp.

Take this seriously. The Sunday dread is your most accurate weekly check-in on the cost of your work. If the dread is small, the work is being done sustainably. If the dread is large, the work is taking more from you than it should. Most professionals in any field have some Sunday dread; small dread is normal. If your dread is large enough to ruin your Sunday evening, the work is mis-sized for the rest of your life. Something has to change.

What has to change is not, usually, the work itself. It is the proportion. You have been working too much, or too

late, or in the wrong games, or under too much financial pressure, or some combination that is summing into a load the rest of your life cannot carry. The Sunday dread is the body's accurate report on the load.

The load can be reduced. The reduction is uncomfortable because every component of the load was being justified by some chain of reasoning that seemed, in isolation, sensible. *I need to play this volume to make my number. I have to play these stakes because the games are softer at this hour. I cannot take Tuesday off because Tuesday is my best day.* Each justification is plausible. The sum of the justifications is a life that produces Sunday dread, year after year.

You have to be willing to question the justifications. Not all of them. Just the most expensive ones. Cut the volume that is producing the worst dread. Skip the late-night session that is destroying your Wednesday. Take Tuesday off if Tuesday off would let you play the rest of the week without bracing. The financial cost of the cuts is small compared to the human cost of the dread, when you actually do the math, which you have been refusing to do.

Now the open part.

The Sunday evening that has no dread is a real thing.

I have had it. Other players I respect have had it. It exists. It does not require quitting poker. It requires arranging poker so that the work is one part of a life rather than

the gravitational center that the rest of the life is bending around.

What does it look like?

It looks like a Sunday evening where you are reading a book or making dinner or talking to someone you love, and the upcoming week is in the back of your mind only as a thing you are looking forward to, not a thing you are bracing for. The work is good work. The work is well-sized. The work is something you are going to do because you want to do it, and when it is done you will go on with the rest of your life, and the rest of your life will not be a recovery from the work, because the work was not damaging.

This is what sustainable work looks like in any field. It is rare. Most people in most fields do not have it. The fact that almost no one has it does not make it unreal. It just means it has to be built deliberately, and almost no one builds it.

You can build it. The building takes years. It begins with taking the Sunday dread seriously instead of explaining it away. The dread is the symptom. The cause is the proportion. The proportion can be adjusted. Adjust it.

If you are in the middle of a career, you will not be able to make the adjustments all at once. You will lose income. The income loss will frighten you. The fright will tell you to stop adjusting and go back to the way things were. Do

not listen to the fright. The fright is the voice of the construction that has been producing the dread. The construction wants to stay. The construction is not on your side.

Stay the course. Cut the volume. Keep the cuts. After three months the income will have leveled out at the new place, and the Sunday dread will be smaller, and the body will be different, and the work itself will be sharper because it is being done by a person who is not depleted.

This is what *loved and wanted-nothing-from* looks like, applied to your relationship with your own work. The work, properly sized, is not asking you to give it your weekends, your evenings, your mornings, your relationships, your body, your sanity. The work is asking you to come do it for some bounded number of hours, and then to go live the rest of your life, which is also where you actually live. The work has been wanting more than it should. You have been giving more than you should. The new arrangement asks for less, and gives you back what was being taken.

The Sunday evening becomes, in the new arrangement, a quiet evening. The week ahead is a week. It does not own you. You are looking forward to dinner. You are looking forward to a walk in the morning. You are looking forward to the session that will happen, in due time, as one part of a balanced life that is not being sacrificed to it.

This is available to you. It is not somewhere else. It is just a different proportion of the same elements.

Sit with this Sunday evening. Notice the weight, if it is there. Don't argue with it. Just notice.

Then, this week, change one small thing in the proportion. Take one evening off. Skip one session. Eat one dinner sitting down. The change will be too small to matter. The change will be the start.

The Sundays will get quieter.

The years will get easier.

You did not have to live with the dread.

You only thought you did.

# XII

## THE LOVED PLACE

I have been writing about pain for eleven chapters and I want to write about something else now.

There is a place to play from that almost no one finds, and the players who find it have something the rest of us are still looking for.

It does not have a good name. The closest name I have for it is what we have been pointing at on the cover and through the chapters. *Loved and wanted-nothing-from*. It is the place where you sit at the table not needing the cards to do anything for you, not needing the session to deliver anything to you, not needing the result to confirm anything about you. You are simply there, with the hand in front of you, in a body that is not bracing.

I want to describe what it feels like, because the descriptions in the literature are mostly bad, and you may not have understood that this is something you can have.

It feels, first, like a release in the chest.

Most of the time, when you sit at the table, there is a small tightness in the chest that you have stopped noticing because it has been there for so long that you take it for the normal state of being at a table. It is not the normal state. It is the bracing. It is the body's anticipation of what could happen — the loss, the cooler, the embarrassment, the consequences. The bracing is constant. You stopped feeling it years ago because you have been inside it for so long that you have no contrast.

In the loved place, the bracing is gone. There is just breath. The chest is loose. The shoulders are not up around your ears. The breath is reaching the bottom of the lungs. You did not relax on purpose. The relaxation arrived because the part of you that was bracing has, for the moment, stepped aside. The body remembered how to be a body that was not preparing for damage.

It feels, second, like time slowing down.

When you are bracing, time is fast. The hands come at you. You are reacting. The session feels like it is on a track that is moving you through it, and you are trying to keep up. You finish a session and cannot quite remem-

ber what happened. The hours have passed without your really being in them.

In the loved place, time spreads out. The hand has space. You see it more fully. The action takes the time it needs to take. There is no urgency, even when the pot is large. The urgency was a feature of the bracing. Without the bracing, the urgency is gone. You can be inside the hand the way you would be inside a long conversation with someone you love — present, unhurried, alive to it.

It feels, third, like the table becoming clearer.

When you are bracing, the table is something between an enemy and a stage. You are watching the players to see what they will do to you. You are watching yourself to see how you will be perceived. The watching is full of self-reference, and the self-reference is filtering everything you see.

In the loved place, the watching is just watching. The players are people doing what they are doing. You read them more accurately because you are not running them through the filter of how they might damage you. You see the man in seat three for who he actually is. You see the woman in seat seven. You see the kid who just sat down. They are not your enemies. They are not your audience. They are people you happen to be doing this strange activity with, and you can be curious about them without needing them to be one thing or another.

It feels, fourth, like the cards being okay.

I do not know how else to say this. The cards come. The cards do what they do. None of the doing requires anything from you. You play your hand. If it wins, you stack the chips. If it loses, you slide them in. Either way is okay. The okayness is not a story you are telling yourself about how it should be okay. It is just the actual state of being okay, regardless of which way it went.

This is the deepest part of the loved place, and the part that is hardest to describe. The cards are doing what cards do. You are receiving what they bring. You are not adding the layer of *this should have been different* that you have been adding, automatically, for years. The river was the river. You called or you folded. The chips moved. The next hand is dealt. There is no second story being told over the top of the first one. The first story is enough.

This is what we have been pointing at, on the cover of this book and through eleven chapters of bad beats. *Loved and wanted-nothing-from* — applied to your relationship with the cards, with the table, with the session, with the year, with the career, with yourself. Loved by the larger thing that was here before you started. Wanted-nothing-from by it. Free, in the moment, to play the hand because it is the hand in front of you, with no agenda larger than to play it well.

How do you find this place?

You do not, exactly. The place is not somewhere to get to. The place is what is left when the things in the way have moved aside. The eleven chapters before this one were each about a thing in the way. The river that haunts. The long loss. The friend who passed. The partner you have been hiding from. The hatred at three in the morning. The hand you knew was wrong. The talent question. The years. The person at the table you would not befriend. The small erosions. The Sunday dread. Each is a layer that has been keeping you out of this place. The work of the book has been to loosen the layers, one by one, so that the place can become accessible.

You will not get all the layers off. No one does. The work is lifelong. You will arrive at the loved place for stretches of minutes, sometimes hours. Then you will be back in the layers. Then you will arrive again. The arriving and leaving are the rhythm of the practice. Over years, the arrivals get more frequent and longer. The leavings get briefer and less complete. You spend more of your sessions in the loved place than you used to. The loved place becomes, eventually, the default — interrupted by occasional returns to the bracing, rather than the bracing being interrupted by occasional moments of grace.

This is the trajectory of the long path. It is not arrival anywhere. It is the slow shift in proportion. The bracing was 99% of your sessions. Then 95%. Then 80%. Then 50%.

Then 20%. The shift takes years. You do not notice it from inside. You notice, at some point, that a session has gone by and you were not bracing the whole time. You think back and realize that this has been happening more often. The proportion has shifted without your having seen it shift.

Now I want to say what the loved place is not, because the misunderstandings are common.

It is not a state you can produce by deciding to. The deciding is the bracing. *I am going to relax now* is a tightening dressed as a release. The loved place arrives when the deciding stops, not when it intensifies.

It is not a state you can fake. The body can tell. Other players can tell. The performed loved place is just another costume, and costumes have their own costs. The actual loved place has a quality of unforced-ness that no performance can reproduce.

It is not a state that prevents bad results. You will still lose hands in the loved place. You will still have downswings. You will still get cooled. The cards do not adjust to your interior state. The loved place changes how the results land in you, not what the results are. The chips still move. The mortgage still has to be paid.

It is not a state that requires you to give up wanting to win. You can want to win and be in the loved place. The two are compatible. What is not compatible with the loved

place is *needing* to win — needing the result to confirm something about you, needing the bankroll to do something for your sense of self. The wanting is fine. The needing is the bracing. Drop the needing and the wanting becomes lighter and the loved place is available.

It is not a state that you have to earn through sufficient suffering. You do not have to pay for it in advance. It is not a reward for having been a serious player long enough. It is available now. It has always been available. The work is not to deserve it. The work is to remove the things that have been blocking it.

How do you remove the things that have been blocking it?

This is what the eleven chapters were for. The blocks are specific. The river that haunts was a block. The friend who passed was a block. The Sunday dread was a block. Each chapter was a small loosening of one block. The loosening continues after you close the book. It continues for years. Each session, you have a chance to loosen a little more. Sometimes you loosen. Sometimes you tighten. The trajectory is up to you, and to the practice, and to whatever else is shaping you that is not under your control.

I will say one more thing about the loved place, because it is the thing that took me the longest to understand.

The loved place is not for poker.

I mean this carefully. The loved place is the natural state of a human being who is not bracing. Poker happens to be one activity in which the bracing is unusually available to be noticed, because poker has built-in feedback loops that show you, in chips, what your interior state is doing to your decisions. Most activities do not show you this. Poker shows you. So poker is a useful place to do the work of finding the loved place.

But the loved place is not specific to poker. The loved place is the place from which all of life can be lived. The bracing you have been carrying at the table is the same bracing you have been carrying everywhere — at work, in relationships, in the small interactions of your day. The loved place, when you find it at the table, is also available in the kitchen, on the walk, in the conversation with the person you love.

This is the deepest thing the practice can give you. Not better poker. A different way of being a person. The poker was the door. The loved place is the room you walk into through the door, and the room is much bigger than poker, and most of what is in the room is your actual life.

You have been doing the practice for years to win money. You will keep winning money, more or less, depending on how the cards fall. The money was never the real thing the practice was offering. The real thing was the room. Most players never walk into the room because they think the

practice is the practice and the rest of life is the rest of life. The two are the same. The practice is the rest of life, applied at a table where the feedback is sharp enough to teach.

When you finally walk into the room — and you will, in moments, soon, even if you have not yet — you will recognize that you have been here before. The loved place is not new. It is what you were before the bracing. It is the original state. The bracing was the addition. The work has been the slow subtraction of the addition, returning you to what was already here.

You are loved.

You are wanted-nothing-from.

There is nothing the cards can do to take this from you, because this was here before the cards and will be here after.

Sit with this for a moment.

Notice the chest. Let the bracing soften, if it wants to. Don't force it. Just notice that the loved place is available, even now, even reading these words. There is nothing you have to do to deserve it. You can rest there for as long as you want.

When you sit at the table tonight, or tomorrow, or whenever you next sit, see if you can sit from there.

The cards will come.

The cards are not the point.

You are.

## A Final Note

You came for the bad beats and stayed for something else.

I do not know which chapters landed for you. Probably some did and some did not. This is fine. Different readers will need different chapters at different times. The book is a small library of pains, and you can return to whichever shelf is currently lit.

I want to say one thing as we close, because it is the thing the chapters were all circling and I want to say it directly.

The pain you have been carrying as a player is not separate from the rest of your life.

I mean this in both directions. The pain at the table is informed by the pain everywhere else. The pain everywhere else is informed by the pain at the table. There are not two pains. There is one pain, in one person, expressing itself through whatever happens to be the most present occasion. The river card brings it forward today. Tomorrow

it will be the email. The day after, it will be the conversation with your mother. The pain has many names. The names are local. The thing underneath is the same thing.

This is good news, even though it does not sound like it. It means the work you do at the table is not separate from the rest of your work. Every time you find the loved place between hands, you have practiced something that is available to you in every other context of your life. The skill transfers. The bracing in your chest, when it loosens at the table, has loosened more than just at the table. It has loosened a little everywhere.

This is one of the secret gifts of the long path. You came to win money. You found, slowly, that you were also doing something else. The something else is what stays with you when the cards are not in front of you. The something else is what you take into the kitchen, into the relationship, into the years that come after the playing has stopped, if it ever stops.

The bad beats keep coming. Not just the ones in this book. New ones the book did not anticipate. The world will deal them. Each one will arrive looking like a fresh disaster. Each one will, after you sit with it long enough, turn out to be one more occasion for the same work the older bad beats were teaching.

The work is to keep finding the loved place inside the bad beat. To remember, while the chips are still rattling

and the chest is still tight, that there is something in you  
the bad beat cannot reach. To return there, again and  
again, not because you have to, but because it is your home.

You are loved.

You are wanted-nothing-from.

The hand happens to someone else.

Continue.

— Beyond Range

*A practice in disguise*

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