For Richer,
For Poorer

FOR RICHER, FOR POORER

A LOVE AFFAIR WITH POKER

Victoria Coren

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There from the beginning;
with love, for Giles.

FROM BELSIZE PARK TO BOW

Today, I might win a quarter of a million dollars.

There are only eleven opponents to beat. Unfortunately, they are the eleven toughest poker players in the world. According to the title of this televised battle, we are *The Premier League*.

Phil 'The Brat' Hellmuth is playing: he's won eleven world titles. Dave 'Devilfish' Ulliott is there: the most feared and celebrated player in Britain. Marcel Lüske, 'The Flying Dutchman', is in the line-up: he's such a big star now, he is releasing albums of himself singing poker songs. Between them, my opponents have won fifty million dollars playing cards.

So I'm a little nervous. The minicab, sent by the production company, has been waiting outside for ten minutes while I hunt around my flat for keys, phones, lipstick, newspaper for the lunch-break, £5,000 packet in case of a cash game in the hotel afterwards, pen, tissues, apple. I run out of the house pretty flustered and we have been cruising down Haverstock Hill for some time before I notice that the eyes in the driving mirror have a familiar mournful crinkle.

I say, 'Ray? Is that you?'

I met Riverboat Ray at a cash game somewhere round the back of Islington in about 1999. He stuck in my mind after he told a miserable story about losing a poker hand five years before. He recounted every card and every bet on every street of the hand, as bitterly as if it had been five minutes ago. Later that

evening, he mentioned that he had a new granddaughter. 'What's her name?' I asked. Ray frowned, thought for a while, then shook his head. 'Nope. It's gone.'

I haven't seen him for ages. Now, here he is at the wheel of my courtesy car. Ray tells me he's been banned from the casino in Luton for three years, after a fight with Frank Farnham. It was all to do with an Omaha Hi-Lo hand where Ray is heads-up with Frank Farnham's dad, and Frank Farnham's dad says that Ray has won the pot with three of a kind, but then Frank leans over his dad's shoulder and points out that he has a straight. Frank Farnham has no business doing this, especially in a significant £200 pot, and it all turns ugly, and the car park is mentioned, and now Riverboat Ray is writing letter after letter to the card room manager in Luton to try and get himself reinstated.

I think about that old Islington game, and how frightened I would have been to lose a £200 pot. There were no televised tournaments then, no celebrities, no courtesy cars. None of that stuff existed in poker when I first met Riverboat Ray and I never saw it coming. I didn't want it, either. Poker wasn't about fame, it was about hiding.

But now here I am, lounging about in the back of a complimentary taxi, swept through London to be made up and photographed and settled at a table to take my shot at a million-dollar prize pool with a bunch of famous faces, while Ray is writing letters to try and get himself reinstated at the £50 table in Luton.

Why me? Why me and not him? How come I get to be Queen Alice, gliding across the chessboard to be crowned, while Ray is still the White Knight sitting on a gate?

Waiting to take the left-hand filter at Kings Cross, graciously wishing me luck, Riverboat Ray is probably wondering the same thing.

But if you asked my mother, she would say the question was what was I doing in an illegal poker game round the back of Islington with men called Riverboat anyway. My parents tried

their best. French lessons, ballet lessons, lots of books, careful elocution. Yet I seem to have grown up into Nicely Nicely Johnson.

'Are you not going to take Mile End Road?' I ask.

'Nah,' says Ray. 'Solid traffic. We'll go the back way.'

As he launches into another unlucky Omaha story, I drift away a little. I don't think Ray would mind. We tell these gloomy tales to exorcise them, not because we need them listened to. The rhythm of his words . . . up and down . . . with the flush draw . . . bet the pot . . . the turn comes over . . . is like a gentle piece of familiar background music.

If I were driving my own car, I'd be listening to my poker tape. The story of my life, the soundtrack of the imaginary film, which I have played from Liverpool to the Isle of Man, from London to Baden, from Nice to Monte Carlo, from Los Angeles to Vegas.

The Gambler is on there, of course, which I first heard twenty years ago when it was recommended by the boys in my brother's game. *Better Not Look Down* by B.B. King, which reminded me, before those first tournaments in the Stakis basement, to be brave. *Rescue Me* by Fontella Bass, which made me laugh en route to *Late Night Poker* when I had no idea what I was doing. *There Is Always One More Time* by Johnny Adams, from when I first met the Hendon Mob, saw the hope in their eyes and the visions they hatched, and learned from it. *Beyond The Blue Horizon,* because that could inspire anyone to feel hopeful.

Killing Me Softly, which was playing in the cab as we drove back to McCarran airport in the magical Moneymaker year. *Desperado* by The Eagles, which filled my head with the romantic glamour of flying solo through life, until I got my heart broken and it stopped being funny for a while.

Come And Get It from The Beatles' *Anthology 3*, which makes me thump the steering wheel and think positive, tell myself I'm a winner like a man would. *Take Another Little Piece Of My Heart*

by Janis Joplin, because I came to understand that tournament poker is a bruising, crippling, endlessly disappointing and rejecting enterprise so you have to embrace the masochism, and I love the way she sounds like she is begging for the pain. Then *Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head* by B.J. Thomas, because it's only a game.

You Can Get It If You Really Want by Jimmy Cliff, because it turned out I can win just like anybody else can, everything can click and flow, cards can fall right, spells can be cast, fireworks can go off, and if your trophy isn't shining yet, then you have to keep believing.

Only New York Going On by Francis Dunnery, because everything happens at 4 a.m. All the winning, all the losing, all the adrenaline, all the pain, and all the staring out of windows in empty hotel rooms, with money or without.

And *Let The River Run* by Carly Simon, because that is what it's all about. The river runs its own course, at its own pace, according to its own will, and all you can do is learn how to raft without drowning.

Funny how so many of them are about being alone. All of them, really. And yet, poker is the most companionable thing I do. The Tuesday game is my only regular social fixture. The Vic is my home from home. So much laughter and friendship and adventure – and money. It hasn't been lonely, has it?

I started playing poker to make friends and meet boys. Now I'm turning up with £5,000 in my pocket, thinking I can beat the world champion. I don't know if something went very right, or very wrong.

'You've gone quiet,' says Riverboat Ray as we clunk through the iron gates of the studio.

'Well . . . it's been a long journey,' I reply. 'From there to here.'

Ray says, 'It would've been longer if I took Mile End Road.'

PART ONE

1

1988

The World Series of Poker might as well be the moon.

My brother's game is on the other side of that wall. It makes the whole house smell of smoke. It sounds like a murmur and a clatter at once. Clop-clop go the clay chips, like a sound effect for horses' hooves. Clink-burble go the ice cubes and the whisky in the glasses. The conversation is low, male, rumbly, burst sometimes by laughter or howls of injustice. It is a rebellious, beckoning sound. I want to be there.

We're doing *Twelfth Night* this term. I'm enjoying it. I like Illyria, the magical island of nowhere. I like Feste, who drifts in and out. Where does he come from? Where does he go? Nobody knows. I like the madness below stairs, the rebellion of the uncontainable games, the playfulness and cruelty, disguises and secrecy, the whirligigs of time bringing in their revenges.

But right now, I can't read it. I've been staring at the same page for an hour. Don't want to study Shakespeare. Don't want to solve equations, don't want to write up the effects of iodine on saliva, don't want to learn the dates of Henry VIII or draw an oxbow lake. Don't want to go to bed. Clink-burble-clatter go the chips and the drinks in the other room. The smoke floats and the boys laugh. I want to be there.

♠

The boys speak a weird language of 'trips', 'bullets', 'cowboys' for kings and 'a nugget' for a pound. Matt wears a T-shirt which says

NOT ALL TRAPPERS WEAR FUR HATS. He is going out with Al Alvarez's daughter. That's why the boys play this funny game that nobody else does, because Alvarez led the way. Al Alvarez has climbed mountains and written poetry, and he's been to the World Series of Poker, which might as well be the moon, and he has written a book about it. Al Alvarez is God.

And God knows why they are suddenly letting me play. What do they think? Maybe it's funny. Giles's kid sister – short, chubby, bookish, growing up slowly – putting her pocket money on the table and trying to fit in with the boys. I don't want to flirt with them. I want to *be* them. Big, brash, confident, 18-year-old boys.

Other girls at school have boyfriends. They have properly *old* boyfriends, who wear belts and drive cars. Other girls at school are willowy and graceful, flirty and coquettish, flawlessly bred and perfectly dressed, confident like 35-year-old bankers' wives. I still like climbing trees and visiting my grandma.

They know I'm from different stock. My bus home goes north, through Kilburn and up towards Golders Green, instead of west to elegant Richmond and Putney. I'm not glamorous.

And I don't want a boyfriend. When we were eleven years old, we did an exchange programme with our 'brother school' and had mixed lessons for a week. It was brilliant. The boys mucked around in class, played practical jokes, spent break-time kicking footballs around instead of putting nail varnish on. It was the most fun I've ever had at school. Then the exchange programme finished and all the boys went away again. I miss them.

I did kiss a boy once. It was at a party in a park. I'd stolen some of my brother's dope to impress everybody. I'd never had it before. Somebody held my hair while I threw up. I was no fool; I knew for a fact they were plotting to kill me. Plus there were those deadly herons everywhere. A few hours later, after a snooze in a flower bed, I found myself kissing a boy called Brian, who wanted to be a pilot. It was awkward, embarrassing and

uncomfortable. I won't be doing that again for a while. A long while.

♠

My brother's a poker player but he isn't a gambler, not really. That's no thanks to Grandpa Sam. When we were little, Sam gave us a comprehensive education in blackjack, which he called pontoon. Here was the lesson: he was always the dealer, and we always lost. Sometimes we lost enough to buy him a Fry's Peppermint Cream. If he was really in form, enough to buy him a packet of Park Lane. But at the first sound of our parents' key in the front door, he'd move like a panther. By the time my mother and father had walked the three steps to the kitchen, the money had vanished and he was sitting there in all innocence, 'showing us a card trick'.

My parents only gamble once a year; £5 each way on four horses in the Grand National. That's unless you count their bridge games with Roger and Fiona, every Friday or Sunday night, 10p a hundred. But I don't think that counts. At the end of every bridge night, they put the losers' £2 or £3 or £5 into a jar, and at the end of the year they all go out for a big dinner with the money. The losers don't have to have a worse meal than the winners or anything like that. So it's not gambling, really, it's more like saving.

My father loves watching sport. He gets very involved but he doesn't bet on it. When we were little, he always let Giles stay up late when there was cricket on the radio or an Olympics in the middle of the night, but he only got excited because he actually cares who wins. I remember him once yelling at Jimmy Connors when Wimbledon was on television, 'Forwards!', 'Smash it!', 'Get back to the baseline!', then slumping back on the sofa and sighing, 'God, I wish I was there to shout advice.'

But it was just because he liked Jimmy Connors.

My father is not going to get sick on the dogs and the football, go skint and lose everything, like his uncles did. My father is not like them. He is a self-made man. He went to university and learned to speak 'properly'. He became editor of *Punch* magazine. He sent his children to private school. He was invited for lunch with the Queen, spent all month reading the broadsheets and planning elegant *bons mots* for the palace table, then the Queen took one look at him and asked, 'Why don't workmen wear boots any more?' Canny woman, that Queen. She sniffed a rum bloodline, just like the girls at my school. Nevertheless, some say it's the best girls' school in the country. My father's damned if his children aren't going to benefit from his hard work. They're not going to be poor. They're not going to live and die in Southgate. And they're certainly not going to be crooks, or gamblers.

My father's parents socialized only with other members of the family. They were actually related to each other, distant cousins, even before they got married; they'd never have met otherwise. They went through a fashionable phase as newlyweds, going to horse races and spiritualist meetings in the 1930s, but always with a safe group of uncles and in-laws. My father, an only child, broke that tradition among many others and we don't see much of the extended Corens. But we hear tales of Uncle Sid who nicked the silver at Dunkirk, Great-Grandpa Dave who went away for GBH on his own son-in-law, Fat Sam's spat with Ginger Phil, the Wet Fish Corens of Hoxton, and the ones who threw their lives away in betting shops. It's close enough for my father to be glad he has left it behind. But I'm not. Whenever we do see the relatives, gathered together for weddings or funerals, I love them all. And I always loved sitting at the kitchen table with Grandpa while he smoked and dealt and chuckled, 'It'd take a lot of this to kill ya.' I didn't care that I lost. I just liked playing.

The bridge comes from my mother's side. Grandma Isabel has a heavy accent, wears big earrings, bakes chocolate-walnut

cakes, and bids very loudly because she is deaf. She plays bridge with fellow Hungarian émigrés from one end of St John's Wood to the other. But she has always been very patient about playing with me, even when I was so small that I could only hold eight cards at once and I had to keep putting them down to check things in my little yellow *Book Of Bridge Rules*. She may be a tiny, frail, foreign lady with a bad hip replacement and a faulty hearing aid, but my grandma sparkles like a chandelier. She's the life and soul of a room. If you make an encouraging bid she will immediately go for slam, shouting, 'Don't invite me to a party if you don't expect me to dance!' She can't walk but she always dances.

♠

I hate being at school and I love being at home. Especially when the house is full of Giles's friends. Boys show off and tell jokes, and shout when they're angry. They don't smile and ask personal questions, then bitch behind your back and share your secrets with the class. They don't write diaries, all sweetly floral and girlish on the outside, for you to be unable to resist flicking through at break-time, which say things like, 'I hope Vicky leaves school soon, we all hate her, the fat cow,' and then smile at you across the tuck shop and ask if you want a Highland Toffee.

Boys say what they think to your face. Bit harsh, sometimes, but straightforward. This room feels, for all its billowing smoke and whisky fumes, safe and healthy.

And they are playing this game . . . you get two cards face-down and one face-up, and you put chips in the pot if you like your cards, and more get dealt. Or sometimes you only have two cards, and three are dealt face-up in the middle, and you hope that the three in the middle will chime somehow with your secret two. But even if they don't, you can pretend that they do. And if you pretend right, you can double your pocket money.

It is a serious game. I don't know if they play well or not, since I barely understand the rules myself, but they play seriously. Lots of macho stuff and poker jargon, pocket rockets and big slick (or is it big stick? I'm not sure and don't want to ask) that Matt has picked up from books and his trip to Vegas. It's really cool. One time, we played all night and whoever won the most money took us all up to the Coffee Cup in Hampstead and bought us breakfast.

My entire poker strategy is based on one of Matt's phrases, 'Don't disgrace an ace.' I never pass any hand with an ace in it. I sit waiting for aces to come.

♠

I don't want to go back to school. It's the first day of term, dark as a maths book and cold as its owner's wit. The warmth and laughter of the holidays are already shrinking into a walnut of memory. Yesterday I was a happy, funny, bright kid, playing games and laughing with my family. Today I am fat, clumsy, uncool, living in the wrong part of town, wearing the wrong clothes. And I haven't even got on the bus yet.

My brother walks me up the hill and gives me a cigarette to stop me from crying, and promises that I won't be at school for ever.

♠

On the other side of the ocean, Johnny Chan is winning the 1988 World Series of Poker. Johnny Chan is nicknamed 'The Orient Express', for obvious reasons: he arrived in America before political correctness did.

He was born in the Guangzhou province of China, and in 1962 moved to Texas, where his family ran restaurants. What must they have thought, that good and hardworking Chinese family,

when their number one son dropped out of the University of Houston to become a full-time gambler in Las Vegas? He had been majoring in hotel and restaurant management. He was going to be big in catering. And off he ran to piss it up the wall in the Nevada desert. Or so they must have thought. That's what usually happens.

It works out for Johnny, though. He wins the World Series of Poker in 1987 and 1988, the fourth man to win back-to-back world titles. In the 1988 tournament, there are 167 players and Johnny Chan reaps the grand prize of $700,000. The field includes some of the great names of poker history: Jack 'Treetop' Straus, Puggy Pearson, Crandall Addington, Jack Keller, Johnny Moss, 'Amarillo Slim' Preston. They're pretty much all from Texas.

Betty Carey is the only female player in the field. There's a story about the time she lost a big heads-up match to Amarillo Slim, after he tricked her by asking whether she liked her cup of tea. She said, 'Yes, sure, Slim, it's great.' And then, an hour or so later, during a big pot, he asked whether she liked her hand. And when she said she liked her hand, in a slightly different tone of voice from when she said she liked her tea, he knew she was bluffing and he took her money.

My sympathies are with Betty. I like a nice cup of tea at the table, too.

♠

In a dream, I am just in the middle of folding a 67 offsuit when I am tapped on the shoulder by another me. She is older, filled out in some places, slimmed down in others, still looking very comfortable in the card room.

She says, 'I'd have raised with that.'

I laugh.

'No kidding,' she says. 'It's a lucky hand.'

'So has it all turned out all right?' I ask.

'Pretty good,' she nods. 'You've grown up happy enough. You sometimes wish that you were still a teenager, but only because you've forgotten what it was like. You play poker all the time now, because there's nobody to stop you. The game has taken over your life. You've won a million dollars. You've been to the World Series of Poker. And Al Alvarez has sent you an email, congratulating you on becoming the European Champion.'

'What's an email?' I say.

'It's something that took over everybody else's life,' my older self replies.

I think for a little while.

'Have I got a husband and babies?' I ask nervously. 'And a nice house with a big garden?'

She has her own little think now. Maybe she doesn't want to scare me. But she also wants me to know that girls are more honest when they're older.

'No,' she says eventually. 'You could probably afford the house and garden, what with the million dollars. But you'll quite like your little flat. You won't especially want to move anywhere else. Husband and babies . . . you're in no rush.'

'When I'm *over thirty*?' I ask, in horror. 'Not married? No children? Aren't I incredibly lonely? Am I going to die alone?'

'You might,' she says. 'But you won't find it such a scary idea by then. And you're not lonely. You've got poker. You've got lots of people. You're not lonely at all – apart from occasionally, in an enormous, black, existential way, at four o'clock in the morning, when you are driven mad by the mind-blowing concept of finite human consciousness. And fifteen husbands couldn't cure that!' she chuckles.

There is a pause.

'But I'm not at school any more, right?' I ask.

And she nods.

I pick up my next hand, a pair of tens, and I think, well, that's all right then.

A PAIR OF JACKS

Two jacks! Often a trouble hand. And the trouble is: you're more likely to see an overcard on the flop than not to see one. So it can be kind of a relief if everyone passes before the flop comes down.

A pair of sevens, something like sevens, that's easier to play after the flop. You know fine well whether you want action or not. Jacks . . . not quite a big pair, not quite a small one . . . they have this horrible habit of continuing to look good even when they have gone behind. Frozen there, preserved: could still be as good as they look, or could be artificial beauty now. So hard to tell sometimes. The Botox hand.

How much should I raise with these jacks, then? All-in would be dumb. Let's not be dumb, on the biggest final table I've ever reached. My chip stack is too big to move in; anyone who called would have to be beating two jacks. Suicidal. And I don't want to chase away every hand that's worse than mine.

I don't mind one caller. I'd like one caller. Blinds 8,000–16,000. I'll make it 40,000. Enough to show I'm serious. But less than the full pot, give the weaker hand some odds. I bet 40,000.

Sid Harris re-raises all-in. Damn. I didn't want anyone to go all-in. I certainly didn't want Sid Harris to go all-in. Sid plays a hand once an hour or something. Aces, kings.

Hard to pass a decent pair, though. Haven't had a good hand for ages. Pairs are so pretty, so enticingly symmetrical. Two curvy jacks, like Christmas stockings hanging in a fireplace. Or two round, juicy queens, like quail on a rotisserie. Two spiky kings, determined and macho, like marching soldiers in profile. Two clean, sharp, pure aces. God, I love looking down at my hole cards and finding a pair of matching picture cards. Painted twins.

Does Sid have a prettier hand than mine? 'Whores' or 'cowboys', as the Old School parlance goes? I would never call them 'whores'. The queens aren't whores. They are fat, proud, classy ladies. Like Mma Ramotswe from The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. *And the kings aren't cowboys. Cowboys are American, and America's a republic. The kings look Persian to me. Noble Persians, from that ancient land where cards were played in the fourteenth century. Carpets, cats and cards: what a beautiful culture. Has Sid got kings?*

I like Sid. He's Old School. He lives in Hove and writes books about horse racing. Been playing for a long time. He's like a classic Vic player. I've never actually seen him in the cash game at the Vic, but he would fit right in. Looks right, talks right. Not one of these crazy teenage Swedes. No mindless all-in, all-in, just for the sake of aggression. Thoughtful, gradual poker. And he seems like such a nice man. I don't really want to knock him out.

Wait, wrong thought process. I want to knock everybody out. No pity, no mercy. No feminine. He's not a nice man, he's an obstacle to victory. I want to knock Sid out. I want to grind him into the ground. I want to send him home skint. I want every chip, I want him pleading for the bus fare. I want to obliterate them all.

Crazy teenage Swede, of course, it's easy. I would call in about three seconds. Less. Two jacks, raise, all-in re-raise from a crazy teenage Swede: my chips are in the pot before Björn's even moved.

With Sid, you know, it's more difficult. I have to think about it. The railbirds might disapprove of that. Let's say I call, cards come over, Sid was making a move, I've got massively the best hand – then I thought too long, it looks like a slow roll. But Sid doesn't seem to make a lot of moves. He's a solid player. I respect that.

Then again, I can't pass. For this situation, I've got a hand. It's a chance to knock out a player. More money. Good chips. He could maybe do this with any pair, any ace. Even if he's got me beat, I'm not dead. Five cards to come. Plenty of jacks in the deck.

Well, two.

But you have to get lucky to win tournaments; got to give yourself

the opportunity to get lucky. And this is the most important tournament of my life. It's the final table of the London EPT, that magical week when the all-important European Poker Tour comes to my own home casino. My regular poker opponents are gathered on the rail, watching. Some of them have shares in my action, others just want to see a local player do well in the big event. $1,000,000 available as first prize. No woman has ever won it before.

And I got to this final by being gutsy; can't switch that off now. Can't hide from chance. If I lose the pot, I still have chips. Not many, but some. I don't need to win the tournament anyway. It's enough just to have made the final. I've won tournaments before, but never made the final of anything so hugely significant. Just getting here, that's enough. I'm happy now.

What am I thinking about? I have two jacks and a man's gone all-in! It's Christmas! I call.

Sid rolls over two nines.

Poor Sid. It's a nice hand. He's entitled to be in front. He's entitled to a 50/50 against a couple of overcards, and he's entitled to be better off even than that. I raise a lot more often than he does. I've raised with some outright rubbish in this tournament so far, and got away with it. He's entitled to a pass from me in this spot. He's unlucky I've got two jacks.

Then again, no early cheers. Plenty of nines left in the deck. Two of them. Two fat apostrophes. Two evil hand grenades, waiting to explode out of the dealer's fist and kill my brave jacks. My vulnerable knaves. Poor boys. I will protect them. I will protect them from the nasty nines. Nina from Pasadena will not come flirting off the deck to wink at my helpless little jack tars, turn their heads and sink their boat. No nine!

The flop comes: K♦ . . . 4♦ . . . 10♣.

That's okay. No risky backdoor flush draw. Sid doesn't have the nine of diamonds. The curse of Scotland. But why have I let that card come into my head? Why did I even think about it? It's like I want it to come! I'm practically SUMMONING it out of the pack! Like I'm

URGING the turn card to give Sid a set! Go away, curse of Scotland. Focus. Jack of spades, jack of spades, jack of spades . . .

K♥.

No problem there. Two pairs each. Mine are better. Blank, blank, blank . . .

J♠.

The jack of spades! Just the fellow I wanted to see! Not that it makes any difference. A blank would have done. I don't need the full house. But I thought about the jack of spades and he just showed up, like sometimes when I'm thinking about my dad and then he rings. Always quite a comforting feeling. A good sign. Good omen. My dad ringing, likely to be a good day. Jack of spades showing up, maybe a good tournament.

Unlucky, Sid. Well played.

Wow. I seem to have quite a few chips now. The crowd is shouting encouragement as I stack them.

And there are only seven of us left.