

Life on *Tilt*

Confessions of a Poker Dad

A Novel by

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Prologue

You don't know me. You may think you know me. But you don't. You've probably seen me. We may have spoken or shared a laugh. We might have been best friends or even married. But you don't know me. You can't know me. I'm a poker player. I play a game many consider honorable, but I don't trust anyone who plays it. I have an uncanny talent for reading other players, but can't manage a personal relationship to save my life. I play the game for profit, yet I have no respect for money or what it represents.

Maybe you know somebody like me. "Poker Dads," we're called. We speed-dial our children during breaks between hands to wish them goodnight. We make jokes at the table about ex-wives and ex-bank accounts. We cherish memorable poker hands more than we do life's pivotal events.

I've played poker at every level, from nickel-and-dime neighborhood games to the richest poker tournament ever, matching wits with characters found nowhere else along the way. It's been a pretty good life—or perhaps "interesting" is a better description of what I've been through. I invite you to decide for yourself. Just remember—don't try to understand me. You'll only end up frustrated and confused. Trust me on this one.

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A preview of *Life After Tilt* follows glossary

Chapter I

The Big Hurt

I am so thoroughly capable that it terrifies me. I am preprogrammed to excel. Despite my best efforts, I am unable to fail. I accomplish great things, yet each achievement leads me a step closer to absolute self-destruction. I have what I want, but I need what I don't have. And when I get it, I punish myself for it. There will never be enough to pacify the insatiable beast within. It's not a burning desire or a consumptive passion: I have no sense of purpose, but only a pointless drive to destroy. Destroy myself. Destroy my family. Destroy anything or anyone who helped create me. I don't want to succeed. I just want to exit—as quickly and painlessly as possible.

“Action to you, sir.”

Story of my life...

I survey the table: seven men of various ages and social strata, and one elderly woman in the process of losing this month's social security check. Players sitting out the hand are usually divided into two groups—those studying the active players for moves they might try out in a later hand, and those more interested in watching TV, eating or talking. However, I now see eight pairs of eyes looking squarely at me, plus the dealer's, who is now repeating, “Action to you, sir”—this time with added emphasis. Time stands still as I consider the situation at hand.

Then there are all the things I'm not considering. I'm not considering my soon-to-be ex-wife of ten years who called this morning to wish me luck in the biggest poker event ever, then sighed and complained that our family wasn't the biggest

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thing in my life. I'm not considering our ten-month separation, or the semi-affair that pushed all the chips onto the table, calling my bluff. I'm not considering our twin boys or my daughter, whom my estranged wife refers to as "her children," nor am I considering their sweet voices, so eager to wish Daddy good luck with the game. I'm also not considering the lavishly-endowed room-service girl who knocked at my door this morning in the middle of the call, or how I doubled the bill as a tip when she expressed great interest in my poker playing abilities. I'm not considering the job I used to have or the life I used to lead. Right now, I'm just considering the game, the players, the cards...the *situation*.

Immediately in front of me are two cards face down with a picture of my twin boys encased in glass atop them. This was a gift from my wife when our boys were just a few months old. I'm sentimental about it. I use this object to protect my cards until I decide to relinquish them, which I'm not yet ready to do. A few inches in front of my cards is a stack of chips representing the \$250 I've just bet. No other player has cards except the guy three seats to my right, who calls himself "The Big Hurt." This guy has been bullying others at the table, and it looks like I am his next target. In front of Mr. Hurt are also two cards: a black-and-gold pyramid protects these—a less sentimental talisman than mine, it seems to me. There are no chips in front of my adversary, as he has just bet everything he has, going "all-in." This is the ultimate move in poker, indicating either an unbeatable hand or certainty that the bet will not be called.

We're playing No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em—the Cadillac of poker. For a purist, it's the only game. Here's how it works: Each player gets two cards face down and is then provided an opportunity to bet before additional cards are dealt. The action

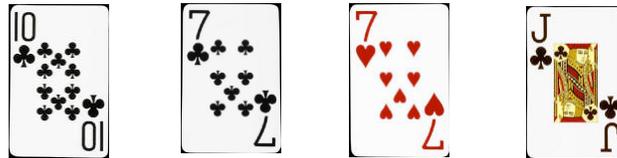
is helped by two forced bets: one player puts in a nominal, obligatory bet called the small blind; the next player puts in another, slightly higher, obligatory bet called the big blind. Other players are required to bet at least as much as the big blind or fold.

Once players decide to bet or fold, the dealer places three cards face up in the middle of the table. This is called “the flop.” All players with cards remaining can use these cards along with their two down cards to form a poker hand. Another round of betting consists of each player checking (passing), betting, folding or raising. Once the players with cards remaining have contributed an equal amount to the pot, the dealer places another community card face up on the table. This is called “Fourth Street” or “the Turn.” Another round of betting occurs, then the dealer places a fifth and final shared card face up on the table. This is called “Fifth Street” or “the River.” After a final round of betting, the remaining players “show down” their hands. The best five-card hand collects the pot.

The pot I’m looking at was \$350 before my \$250 bet. “The Big Hurt” has put on a pair of sunglasses and seems to be staring straight through me. The chips he has put in the pot are of various colors, thus denominations. I eyeball the stack and estimate it at \$2,500. I have \$1,800 remaining, which is what I would have to risk to call his bet. I look at my cards again—the five and seven of diamonds. Pretty meager holdings, but I’m playing the hand for two reasons. First, I was in the big blind and no one raised before the flop, so it didn’t cost me anything extra. Second, I love this hand! Statistically, it’s a horrible poker hand, but one that I’ve had some success with in the past. Plus I once worked for a company with the initials “G” and “E,” so a seven and a five have meaning, since “g” and “e” are

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the seventh and fifth letters of the alphabet. Poker players shouldn't be superstitious, but many of us are. The board now consists of these cards:



I have three sevens—“trips” they are called: a good hand, but there are plenty of hands that could beat me now. I decide to employ a standard poker stall.

“Count it,” I say to the dealer, my way of requesting he verify the amount of my antagonist’s wager.

Mr. Hurt is visibly annoyed. The dealer complies. As he counts, I consider the action up to this point. Five players saw a cheap flop for the \$10 blind. After the flop, one player had bet \$50. Two players folded and Mr. Hurt raised to \$125. I called and the original bettor folded.

Now the turn has produced a dangerous card. Mr. Hurt could have an eight and a nine to make a straight, although I dismiss this as a long shot. I wonder if he has “hit the flop” harder than me, meaning that he has a bigger seven (a seven with a card higher than a five) or a pair of tens. This is possible. It is also possible he has two clubs and now has a flush. When he raised after the flop, I put him on either a flush draw or a big pair like queens or kings. If the latter is the case, one of the paired cards has a good chance of being a club, giving him a big flush draw as well.

The dealer finishes counting and announces that the bet is \$2,200 to me. My mind snaps back to the first time I played cards for money. I was about ten years old, and I had convinced my sister to play rummy for pennies. She won 30

cents from me in less than an hour. I was so mad that I threw the coins and cards at her and stormed out of the room. When she returned the coins later that day, I realized it wasn't the money that had upset me. I was incensed I had lost. I've always been extremely competitive about everything, especially games. *Risk*, *Monopoly*, *Life*—all took on added dimensions when I played. This eventually extended to sports, girls—you name it. I wanted to win, even when the stakes were only winning. If winning mattered to someone else, then I was willing to challenge them. To paraphrase Marlon Brando from *The Wild Ones*, the world was asking me, “What are you competitive at?” My reply was, “Whaddaya got?”

“Clock!”

The Big Hurt startles me back to the present. Players call for the clock either when they want to pressure you to make a quick decision or when they're just tired of waiting. Since I'm not sure how long I have drifted, I suspect it's a bit of both in this case. In a casino, the “clocked” player has 60 seconds to declare a decision before his hand is deemed dead. I refocus and narrow down Mr. Hurt's possible holdings. I decide he has either a flush or a big pair. I do some quick math. If he has a flush, there are ten “outs,” cards that can help me. Any of the three remaining fives, tens or jacks—or the remaining seven—would give me a winning hand. If he has a big pair, there are only two outs that will help him. For example, if he has two kings, only one of the remaining two kings will give him a winning hand. With \$350 in the pot, plus the \$250 I have bet and the \$250 he matched before his all-in, I could win \$850. He has effectively raised me \$1,800, since that's what I have left to match his all-in move, so I need to call \$1,800 to win \$2,650: about 1.5:1 pot odds. If I call and he has a big pair, I am a 19:1 favorite. If his big pair includes a club,

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this gives him nine more outs, reducing my advantage to 4:1. If I call and he has a flush, I have about a 10% chance of winning and a 15% chance of tying, meaning the odds are 6:1 against me overall.

“Fifteen seconds.”

It has become urgent that I make my decision.

“Ten...nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...”

“I call,” I say, and show my hole cards—the five and seven of diamonds.

Mr. Hurt is not pleased. He shows the king of spades and the king of diamonds. I’m a huge favorite now to win the pot, which stands at \$4,450. A couple of players nod in my direction to acknowledge my successful analysis of the hand. Poker players appreciate well-considered decisions by other players—particularly when that decision goes against a player who has been bullying the table.

I watch the dealer discard one card—“burning,” it’s called. Next, he’ll deal the river. Of the 44 cards not yet exposed, two help my opponent, while the other 42 give me the pot. I’m feeling pretty proud of myself. I think of how a win here would allow me both to cover some tournament buy-ins and to treat my estranged wife to that new shed she’s been talking about. I imagine how she might have mixed emotions about its funding. “We’ll call it the gambling shack,” she’d say, not to be funny, but rather to maintain the shroud of shame she has woven around my beloved hobby. I attempt to rationalize the virtual expense of the hours of play and thousands of hands I’ve already seen just to be able to make this call, somehow trying to prove to myself that this is more important than “investing in my marriage.” But why couldn’t I have done both?

From a gambling perspective, marriage shouldn't be that difficult. There are only two variables—you and the other person. Poker is much more complex—more people, more math, more combinations of events. No two hands are ever exactly the same, like snowflakes. The hands form patterns that merge and blend and evolve until one day you are able to see through them how things really are. And you *know* “The Big Hurt” has two kings and very few options, and you have a license to take his money.

The dealer places the river card face up on the table—the king of hearts: one of the two cards that gives my opponent the pot. This guy just did what you never want to see happen. It's called a “suck-out” in poker, and Mr. Hurt has just pulled one off to the tune of \$4,450. I'm stunned—too stunned to answer the first time the dealer asks if I'd like to replenish my chips. The second time he asks, I declare, “I need some air.” A couple of players express their condolences and tell me I played well. Small consolation for losing, but I thank them just the same. Most poker players are good people who recognize it's a game of skill with an element of luck. Others are more show than substance, and I'll introduce you to some of them in good time.

I make my way out of the casino. My mind is still whirling as I mentally replay the hand, watching the king hit the board over and over and over.... The casino flashes and chimes like an enormous pinball machine, but I'm oblivious to it all. I realize for the thousandth time why professionals call this the hardest way to make an easy living.

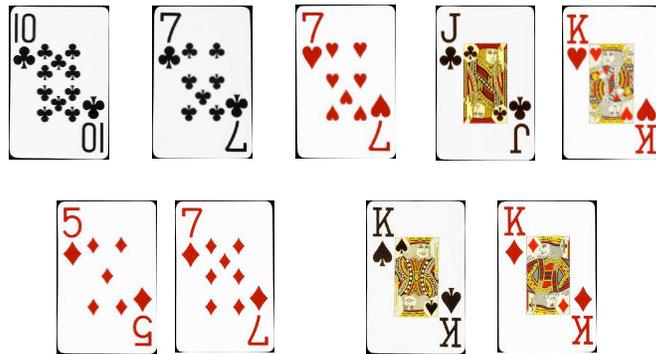
There's no time to dwell on this now. Tomorrow I will play in the richest poker tournament ever. I consider my odds for a moment. What chance do I have against the best players in the world? Even the average poker enthusiast reads strategy

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books, plays tens of thousands of hands per year and knows the odds of almost any given situation by rote. They can read other players with pinpoint accuracy and calculate when the odds dictate a call—and how much to bet to make calling a mathematically incorrect decision for their opponent.

If this were the entire game, everyone would be nearly even and the only winner would be the house. That little something extra that makes some players pull out ahead of the pack is a killer's instinct. A winner has the courage—or recklessness—to load the bullet, spin the chamber, point the barrel at his own head and pull the trigger without flinching. He is more capable of taking himself out than anyone else at the table. Controlling this internal rage and channeling it against other players is lethal. It's the next dimension in poker. It's not going all-in pre-flop with pocket aces. Any schmoe can do that. And every 221 hands, most do. It's about taking that self-destructive streak and externalizing it, then controlling it and unleashing it at the right time.

In poker, it's kill or be killed. Most people don't know what it's like to die. I do. I've died financially and been restored. I've died spiritually and been resurrected. I've died emotionally and been revived. And I should have died physically, but even ingesting a bottle of drain cleaner on my 25th birthday couldn't finish me off. I'm virtually indestructible. I'm a machine. I can't be killed, so I may as well kill the competition. I've been preparing myself for this my entire life, and I will not be denied.

Life Lesson #1:**My Cards****The Big Hurt's Cards**

No matter how much you try to avoid the big hurt, it will find you—in my case it was table 12, seat four.