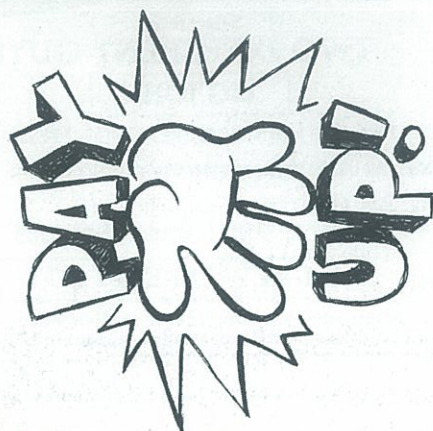


royal flush:

eight rules to beat a gambling
boyfriend at his own game and
get him into bed.

written by: chiara barzini



A poker player faces some tough decisions on many occasions. He usually has four choices to make: check, bet or call, raise, or fold. To make a wise decision, the player needs to establish the approximate expectation of each possible move and choose the one that has the best return, if any, or simply fold.

Jason wanted to be a professional poker player. He gauged his lover like an adversary. Like this: he showed up at my bedroom window and made animal voices. He climbed through and tumbled onto my bed. He hugged me first, then my stuffed raccoon, Garrett. Here he fell asleep, away from debts and collectors. Jason did not fuck, drink, smoke, or drug his gambling ambition away; he slept it away — that is why we didn't last. I was sixteen when I met him. I had just moved from Rome to the San Fernando Valley with my family. I spoke English with a heavy Italian accent and mistook words like "rad" to mean things like "sickly."

It was at a Christmas party in the Valley - my first Christmas in LA. It was a potluck dinner. We brought lasagna. Jason sat at a table smoking a cigar and playing poker with three other men. He had a receding hairline. His cigar kept going out and he relit it using a flame that was set too high and burnt his eyelashes. I watched him from my chair. He was not charismatic. In fact there was something pathetic about how solitary he was in his enthusiasm for the game. He called a guy on bluffing three times and he was always wrong. He had no luck or strategy, yet he kept putting his chips forth and screaming things like, "I'm calling you on that, fucker!" or, "Raise it bitch!"

When he got up I followed him to the drink table and said "hi". I asked him how his game was going. "Oh, it's all strategy. I am good with that." He ate his words up and could not approach his cigar with the same nonchalance as he did at the table. He held it between his fingers, eying it sporadically, but never daring to give it a drag. He asked what were my parents thinking moving from Rome to the San Fernando Valley. I said I asked myself the same question every day. He offered to take me out of the Valley into Hollywood. I told him he should and I gave him my phone number. A part of me hoped that some of his extroverted—if awkward—rowdy poker table ways, would translate in bed. I was a precocious teen and I had just discovered orgasms —how to have them and how to use other objects to help me have them. I was fixated on the idea of achieving climax. I imagined a gambler would have sensual intuition. Sex with him would be like it was for Lauren Hutton in "American Gigolo."

On our first date we did not leave the Valley as he'd promised. We bought two large pizzas at San Remo's on Victory and Sepulveda and I took him to the caves on top of the Vanalden Hills. I was into nature -- a suburban response to the lack of a social outlet in the San Fernando Valley. As we walked up the trail, I imagined that my intimacy with plants would seduce him. How serene and sexy I must seem, away from the boulevards and into the hills. I walked ahead of him, hoping he would notice my ass, or the elegance with which I let my arms get scratched by the thorns of the bushes. Every

time I turned, he looked fatigued, bothered. Poker players don't get out much, I realized. He panted a lot.

Calculate the odds against you, and if the return is greater than the odds, make the bet.

He liked me; I could tell. He talked about Bertolucci like he was the best director in the world. And I knew he did it because I was Italian. I can't stand Bertolucci, but I didn't tell him that. We sat on dirt with our arms folded, in front of the ashes of someone else's bonfire. Everything was quiet. Our voices, trapped in the sandstone cave walls, had a hollow resonance that made us feel intimate - like we were in a very small bedroom whispering, instead of on top of a mountain. Beer, urine, and spray paint emanated from the caves. It was so romantic.

Jason mumbled. And then he mumbled again. I said, "what?" He asked what I liked. I said theatre. He said he hated Neil Simon because he was "so high school." I asked him why he mumbled so much. He said guys were supposed to mumble — especially when they liked a girl. So he liked me, which was good because from the way he'd been panting and grunting to himself it was hard to tell. He told me about how hard it was for him to be obsessed with playing poker.

"You are obsessed?" I asked. "How can you be obsessed if you never win?" He said practice makes perfect. Soon he would play with Asian businessmen and teen-age Arab princes. "I can play poker for a day and a half straight without sleeping, baby." He scratched his head tilting it sideways, making his hand reach around the outer part of his skull. I liked that gesture. It reminded me of something Jordan Catalano would have done looking at Angela. Then he kissed me and I knew it would happen. He was totally going to give me an orgasm.

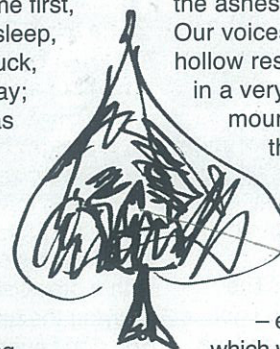
If the odds are in your favor, bet as heavily as you can.

I unbuttoned his pants and went for it. His member was a great size. Full but also not invasive, accessible and hard. Some instant after my lips touched him, he clenched his teeth, backed up, and announced, "I am sort of a decadent kind of guy, you know." I reassured him, "No you're not." At the time I thought "decadent" meant something bad, like "old" or "run down." Like he was trying to tell me he wasn't good enough for me or he was too used up. I went right back down his pants until he said, "I mean, I like romantic things."

Two weeks later Jason had spent his rent and bill money during a twenty-five hour-long poker game. I had seen him five times during that period and had tried to establish an oral relationship with no success. My friend Malaika suggested I go straight for the sex, that maybe he had some problem with women expressing servitude.

Because there is a lot of psychology involved during a game of poker, psychological strategy is very important.

I asked Jason if he wanted to do it and he said, "What's the rush?" I was horny, obsessed with the image of his big arms embracing me and manipulating me into orgasmic convulsions. He was worried. He said he had no money; he



looked pale and emaciated. His teeth had formed a layer of yellowish gel around them, and he walked around his house in pajama pants holding his cat, Eva Sanchez, on his shoulders. He was playing so much poker and losing so much money, that the rare times we slept in the same bed, his fingers twitched and curled as if they were holding cards, clutching an imaginary flush.

He did not have a calling for gambling. This made him depressed. To counteract his dejection, he borrowed money from me so he could play a last game and win his money back. But nobody wins when they're desperate. He ran out of funds and I did too. He started a diet of bread, raw garlic, and pickled eggs. His sweat had the scent of condiments, but I still wanted him. It was mostly a competitive impulse, I knew this. I had invested too much on the gambler not to get something back. But there was something beyond that too, a part of me genuinely liked to see how repellent he could get and how able I still was to feel attracted to him. I would come with Jason no matter how bad he smelled.

After the eviction he moved back in with his parents.

They had a mansion in the Hollywood Hills and were often out of town. He invited me to go there on a weekend when they were sailing out to Catalina Island. I told him, "Jason, I want to have sex." He reassured me that a weekend at his house would be a good time to reach a shared climax.

The house was big. Leather furniture, framed important moments, and large, psychedelic art featuring dried up golden twirls on monochrome canvases. I understood why Jason had left home so young. I saw him move about like a stranger, opening the wrong cabinets, bumping his head, "Where the fuck is the oil in this fucking house?" Houses with large rooms and swimming pools were sexy to me, but Jason was shifty, "Chichi", he said, "I love you. You're my best friend." But best friends don't give each other orgasms.

There was a swimming pool in the back yard. Perhaps a vixen smile by the water would make him hard for me, I thought. A nipple flash, a bare back, the absence of a bathing suit. I walked out, got naked, and jumped in the water. I could see Jason's silhouette from beneath the surface. So I tried to emerge with a face he'd want to fuck -- like a mermaid princess or a Californian water-skier from a chewing gum commercial. I felt beautiful, but when I opened my eyes Jason looked confused.

"Whoa, you're naked."

"Yes, Jason, I am."

"I do have neighbors, you know."

Regularly varying your play is considered a good poker tactic. This means that sometimes you have to 'Bluff' and you should do it tactically.

I said, of course, I understood that it was more appropriate for me to get dressed. He guided me to a back bathroom so I could shower. A service bathroom, a laundry room-type bathroom. The soap on the sink had dust on it and the towels smelled like air freshener. Sex was nowhere to be found. I

showered and then we ate Saltines, pickled eggs, and refried beans with white wine. I tried opening my robe up a bit. Discreetly, so it wouldn't look intentional. Casually I passed a hand on my chest while drinking my second glass of wine. He arched his brow and teased me about being able to see my tits. Though there was nothing flirtatious in his tone, I felt that we were moving towards the right direction. He swallowed the last bite of beans and reached over to stroke my face. Then we went to his bedroom.

The most important thing is body language. It can reveal a lot of how strong your hand is. Over the time players can develop the ability to translate your body language and what you say, into meaningful insight of what hand you might have.

We lay down on our backs without saying a word. I squished between the wall and him, listening to his breath, waiting for something to happen. His erection began to creep up on my leg and that's when I got my airplane feeling -- the one where

I can't let my body relax or it communicates a lack of control to the engine and cause a crash. I held my breath until I became invisible - a quiet, self-contained bird.

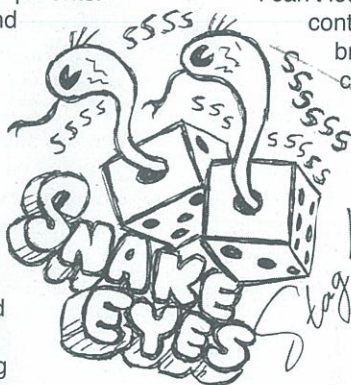
Jason aspired to a kind of gambling mystique that didn't belong to his oblong face. He wanted to be Marlon Brando in "A Streetcar Named Desire." He had to create a poker setting in order to enjoy intercourse. Hiking, water, nakedness were the opposite of sex to him. They meant nothing compared to the comfort of his childhood bedroom, the tinfoil-covered windows, the stale carpet smelling like something of the body. It was dark and intimate like at a poker game here. He rolled over, his tightie whities bulging. He blushed, turned me on my side so I wouldn't see his face, and began to breath down my neck.

The next important thing a poker player must do is not to form a pattern of play.

I closed my eyes, "Dear god, let whatever comes from behind, penetrate me. Let it come in and puncture me, let it be strong." I felt him fumble behind my shoulders and stayed silent, as expectationless as I could. He made his way inside me. I was pulsating. I had held back so much to strategize for this moment. My release was going to be quite carnal and far from "decadent." He rocked me back and forth, thrusting his cock inside me. Sex was awesome and I was going to come.

I did. Shaking and crying with joy. Without turning around I put his arm around my breast and locked his legs inside my warm thighs. I kissed his hand. It smelled like canned beans and for once I didn't care.

Remember, poker is about being able to win big pots, not just getting the highest hand. Being able to disguise your play is probably the most valuable asset you can have.



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