

One Night in November

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At family functions, our grandma would give us grandchildren a handful of quarters to use when playing cards. So since I was nine years old, I have played cards, including Texas Hold'em: a game that I will never play again.

Every time I had walked into grandma's house, I would eventually sit at her kitchen table and play poker with my cousins until someone had won all the quarters. I always beat the rest of the family and would leave with extra money. Grandma's house was my primary source of income until I was 15, when I got a real job bagging groceries that put quarters in my pocket year round.

The first time I played poker beyond grandma's table was at John's house. He also had a kitchen table on which we played poker, but instead of playing for quarters we played for dollars. Because I'd never lost before and had always played on a kitchen table, I played exactly as I had played before. I won my first fifty-dollar bill that evening. After months of winning fifty-dollar bills, I went beyond kitchen tables to play high-stakes games.

A group would play poker every Wednesday in the back room of a bowling alley. The place was smoky, musty, and riddled with old men. Rules restricted new members playing without an invite. I met a man who said that he could get me if I promised to split my winnings with him. I agreed and entered. Instead of making me show identification, old men invited me to join their table. It was a cash game that lasted until

all but one player was out of money. That first night I lost all the money I had brought, but one loss in my life was not enough to stop me.

The next Wednesday I played again. This time, I won more than all the poker money I had ever earned. I won on an intermittent schedule for the next six months, so I quit working at the grocery store because of my poker profits. As a rule to myself, I only played with a portion of the profits from the second week's earnings to ensure I would never lose too much. I kept this rule until one night in November.

I left grandma's quarters to win fifties, then left John's fifties to win old men's hundreds, but hundreds were no longer enough. I brought enough money that night to buy a nice vacation to Mexico for two. I just had to play as I had played in the past and I was sure to win!

I was dealt two nines and decided to raise the pot big. Everyone folded except one man sitting across from me. The dealer next laid down two more nines and a jack on the flop. This gave me my first four of a kind in my life. The man raised the pot big and I called. The next two cards were a ten and another jack. After each round the pot was raised, putting both of us on credit. The time came to show the cards and my four nines had been beaten by four jacks. Suddenly, I had lost double the money I had come with! I felt immediate and tremendous despair. "Two weeks" was all that the winner said to me.

When I think of that loss today, I can easily recall my first visiting the backroom of that bowling alley. But now I imagine the disgusting mildew, the stench of whisky and suffocating cigarette smoke, and all those depressing old men sitting silently.

I was done with poker and back to working at the grocery store for a long time. I still travel to grandma's house for family functions. They still play poker around the kitchen table. But me, I stand with my aunts and uncles talking about current events while thinking about that one night in November.