Michael Konick. *The Man With the $100,000 Breasts and Other Gambling Stories*. Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 1999. pp. 229-234

The Hand You're Dealt

I didn’t win the main event at the World Series of Poker this year. I'm not the reigning world champion. I'm not $1 million richer. (All of which should be obvious, since I am writing this story instead of luxuriating on some Caribbean island with my new best friend the showgirl.) But along with thousands of other poker players-hardened professionals and serious amateurs alike-I tried to do all these things. And you can, too.

Which is why the World Series of Poker may be the most democratic sporting event on the planet. Anyone with a little money, a lot of gambling talent, and a highly developed capacity for dreaming can do what I do every year: go to Binion's Horseshoe, enter a modestly priced ($220) satellite tournament, and, by winning said tournament, earn a seat in the big dance, the $10,000-buy-in World Championship. First place in the main event, a four-day odyssey that in
1997 attracted 312 entrants, is $1 million. Second paid $583,000. And for players who finished as low as 27th, the prize was $21,200.

Every type of poker game is played at the World Series of Poker, including various forms of stud and draw. But the king of games, the one used to decide the World Championship itself, is called “no-limit Texas hold'em.” The “nolimit” means you can bet any or all of your chips at any time, a delightful rule that, in recent years, has created a number of million-dollar pots, hands of poker on which a million dollars is riding. Texas hold ‘em is played every day of the year at Los Angeles card casinos like Hollywood Park, the Commerce, and the Bicycle Club, and these are the places where I honed my game, preparing myself for the fiercest poker competition on the planet: guys with lots of gold jewelry, inscrutable faces, and nicknames like “the Master.”

Sharpies.

After many years as a gambling columnist, I figured it was time for me to take my place among the wiseguys.

I arrive at the Horseshoe three days before the start of the World Championship event, allowing myself three shots (and a couple thousand dollars) at winning a satellite tournament, three shots at earning a ticket to the most important congregation in poker.

It does not immediately strike me as ominous foreshadowing when on my first hand-the very first hand I'm dealt at the World Series of Poker-I lose all my chips, all $200 of them. Having raised before “the flop” (the displaying of the community upcards) with a pair of jacks, I end up donating my entire stack of money to a foolish chain-smoking Vietnamese lad who has called me with a pair of fives. When a five comes on the last card, the river, as poker players say, giving him 3-of-a-kind, I'm left with nothing but a blank strip of green felt where once my chips sat so hopefully.

“Unlucky,” I think, reminding myself that if it were not for the occasional bolt of fortune, lesser players would never compete in poker tournaments. Why should they? The better players would always win. Indeed, luck is inherent to poker. But unlike, say, in

baccarat or craps, skill is the game's primary ingredient, especially at the World Series of Poker, where several expert players like Johnny Moss, Doyle Brunson, and Johnny Chan have won multiple World Championships. As I hand the dealer $200 more (players may rebuy at a satellite tournament during the first hour of play), I tell myself to remain equanimous, to handle the bad luck with grace. Good fortune will eventually come my way.

I continue to tell myself this, mantra-like, as I watch three more stacks of $200 disappear down the gullets of three other voracious players. Each time I begin with the strongest hand—every two-card combination is either a favorite or an underdog, depending on what it’s up against—and each time an opponent with a weaker hand spanks me hard.

I hold ace-king; a gargantuan Floridian, scratching his head and chewing on a toothpick, holds ace-queen. The flop comes king-jack-10, and he makes a straight.

I hold a pair of nines; a relic from the age of disco, sporting smoked sunglasses, a silk shirt, and a diamond pinkie ring, calls my raise with an ace-9: An ace comes on the flop, and he's happy as a Bee-Gee.

And most preposterously, both I and my opponent, an unreadable English fellow who plays poker while listening to Mozart through tiny headphones, hold identical hands, a pair of tens. I've got the black ones; he's got the red ones.

Surely we'll split the pot. Alas, four diamonds come on the board. He makes a flush.

I try to be philosophical: These things happen. But then self-pity inevitably rears its ugly head: “But why do they have to happen to me? Especially when I'm trying to win the World Series of Poker! It's not fair!”

Down $800 and feeling inordinately sorry for myself, I go to the Horseshoe's famous coffee shop and drown my sorrows in red meat and pumpkin pie.

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My second attempt at winning the world title starts promisingly. Stung by the previous evening's debacle, I play very “tight,” folding speculative drawing hands and betting aggressively when I'm holding something powerful. For the first hour, while the wild gamblers around me are calling and raising with just about anything, hoping to go “on a rush,” I sit patiently, monk-like, and wait, paying my antes and observing the mayhem. Just when I think I can no longer stand the monotony, I'm dealt a juicy hand, the ace-king of spades. I bet it strongly and get called in two spots. When the flop brings a rash of baby cards, my ace-king holds up and I've tripled my stack.

This happens about four more times. Each hand I start with an odds-on favorite and finish with the money, the way it's supposed to work in a kind and just world.

Three hours into the satellite tournament, the field has been narrowed from 120 to 36. The final 11 survivors will earn seats in the World Championship. I've built my original $220 buy-in up to $4,700. The promised land is within sight.

And then I look down to find what I've been waiting for all night: a monster. I've been dealt two kings, the second most powerful starting hand in Texas hold ‘em. I hope to get into a raising war with preferably one other opponent, someone who thinks he's

holding real power, only to discover that the wily journalist from Los Angeles, the one who's been playing so patiently, so precisely, is holding the hammer. My wish comes true. I raise. A pro down at the other end of the table, one of the top players in Maryland, considers his hand for a moment and raises me back. I reraise him, pushing my entire stack of chips toward the center of the table. “All in,” the dealer announces.

Without hesitation, the Maryland pro pushes all his chips toward the middle. There's close to $10,000 in the pot.

I can think of only five hands the pro could have called with. “I got aces,” he says, flipping up his cards. And that's the one hand I didn't want to see. My kings are the second most powerful starting combination; his aces are the first.

Now only two cards in the deck can help me. I need to get lucky.

The miracle I need to stay in the tournament does not materialize. As the dealer pushes the mountain of chips toward the pro, the pile of hundreds that will surely earn him a seat in the World Championship, the pro shrugs at me and says, “Bad luck.”

I nod silently and make a hurried exit, trying mightily to honor an age-old credo: Real men do not cry at the poker table.

Yes, bad luck, indeed, I think, calculating the probability of another player holding aces when I'm holding kings. It's a complicated proposition, but depending on how you figure it, the odds are as low as 25-1 or as high as 5,600-1. (A regular tournament player later tells me it's happened to him four times-and he's been playing for 20 years.) I trudge off to my room, feeling like there's a sticky film of misfortune clinging to my back.

But on my final satellite attempt, the night before the main event begins, everything goes wonderfully, joyously, right. I'm reading my opponents like their cards were turned face up. I'm getting rid of weak hands precisely the moment before they get me in trouble. I'm milking my strong hands for every dollar they're worth.

I'm playing like someone who belongs in the main event at the World Series of Poker.

Indeed, I single-handedly dispatch six players from the tournament, stacking their chips on my expanding pile, growing like a happy hog. As each busted player exits, another comes to fill the empty seat. Soon thereafter I bust him, too. “Guy's a terminator,” someone sighs.

Just then, a new player is parked at my table. Literally. A young man with a ponytail and alligator boots wheels a hospital gurney to my table. On it is a man of indeterminate age in worse shape than I've ever seen any living person.

Whether because of a debilitating degenerative disease or a profound birth defect, this poker player has essentially been reduced to a head on a stretcher. His torso, or what's left of it, is about the size of a large cat. He does not appear to have legs. The one arm I can make out is as thin as a pool cue and as short as your forearm. His mouth is frozen open in a perpetual gasp.

I know I am supposed to be evolved and educated and politically correct enough that I should not feel revulsion and pity and horror at the sight of this man, this head on a stretcher. I know I am supposed to be able to look beyond his disfigurement and see the humanity within. I know I am supposed to treat him as I would any other poker player. But I can't. I can't even look at him.

Suddenly, I want to be anywhere but here at Binion's Horseshoe, playing in the World Series of Poker. I want to dance and run and make love. I want to do all the mundane and wondrous things the man on the gurney will never do. Trapped on a stretcher, imprisoned in a body that will not cooperate, this man cannot dance and run and make love. He can only lie on his bed and watch.

And play poker. His ponytailed assistant holds his cards for him and, when instructed, bets for him. The disfigured man takes in everything, assessing his opponents with a firm, observant gaze that they dare not fix on him.

I need to last only an hour or two more and I'll be in the million-dollar main event. But I know that will not happen.

I know I will eventually confront the man on the gurney across from me, and I know he will bust me. I know I will not win the World Championship. I know I will leave the Binion's Horseshoe poker room shaken and slightly nauseous. Yet I also'know I will not curse the whims of fate, the unseen forces that gave the winning cards to someone else.

I know I will lose this game of poker. And I will feel like the luckiest man in the world.