

Play

Speaking to me, you wouldn't say that I was an intellectual **powerhouse** exactly. But if you are **meeting** me over this green baize, your cards and your chips on the table, and the action's on you – well, you should probably rethink.

Of course, I play online a lot now, but it's good to play face-to-face, so there's still a weekly game in the back **room** of the local. Generally we wait til Jim's **closed up** for the night, and play a little limit Hold 'Em. It's a pretty **open** game, in theory any of the regulars could sit in if they asked. There's no **door policy**. "You got the cash, you're **welcome** – rabbits more so", Jim's words. But we're not friends – we're that other thing, poker buddies; we don't like each other, but we know each other intimately; come sun-up, we say **farewell** and we've learned something more about each other – at least, the best players have. We don't speak much: '**goodbye**', 'tata', 'til next week' at the end of the night; a quick '**hello**', 'howyadoin?'' as we sit down. The **goodbye** can be more strained – someone's got to leave poorer than they came.

I didn't choose poker, or even stumble across it like many; it came over to where I was sitting one night, and made itself at home, not so much as a '**hello**'. But I guess, in a way – and with no more idea than Adam of what pocket pairs, or Omaha, or kickers or equity were, let alone ratholing – I'd been playing poker **forever**. Poker's not about cards (you can learn the rank of hands in a minute), it's about people – and that's **eternal**.

*The phone's ringing, and I pick up: "Hello Nick, it's Julia/me," (inexplicably, old ashes leap into **flame**), "it's been a while". (A campfire lit on the forest floor, they say, can set tree roots smoldering below the earth; travelling underground, a wild **fire** springs up far away).*

I sit staring beyond my short stack in front of me, while Benny deals like there's a national **emergency** – cards spinning across the table around me. Shielding with a cupped hand, I peel up the corner of my cards – 8D AC – and, despite myself, superstitiously feel the fire **exit** behind me. I throw in a precious chip as a blind and try to think **strategy**, not tactics. I had to think long **game**. You **play**, you lose; you play, you win; you play.

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In another **time**, (**Lord!** It really did feel like another time), I sat staring at a Times **leader** on "The Pitiful State of Education in this Country": the pun was a familiar one. "*Polemic? – Present, Sir! – Reasoned analysis? – **Absent** today, Sir!*". As always, I wondered where you could store your **brain** so that it wouldn't, like an unruly but precocious pupil, quibble whilst you wrote such drivel; what medium would allow you to preserve your **intelligence**, to be retrieved once you had submitted your copy?

The bell, and I gathered up the cumbersome pile of exercise **books**. Already the chaos of a summer playing field would be gathering into a loose **snake** along the path, funneled into a mass, flowing over the footbridge to the main site, and dispersing to classrooms. I snuck out past the Head's office, (fearsome **Priestess**, on one side her open door, on the other her **high** window, overlooked all).

Avoiding the pushing down in the corridor – "Slow *down*" Mr. Redmond growled in a **low** voice – and still clutching exercise books, I pushed down the handle with my elbow, leaned on the door with my hip and backed my way into my classroom. My previous lesson's traces and some surreptitious doodling on the whiteboard, the **sad** displays boards and early arrivers greeted me.

The others trickled into the room, throwing bags under desks and themselves onto chairs; they looked pretty **happy**, as well they might. I fixed them all with a **smile**; these were the ones that made the job bearable. In the second row, Sophie, a bright girl with a **sunny**

personality, and an intelligence that sometimes put others in the **shade**, smiled back. My class of **distinction**, a bunch of sixth formers that would do well, I knew. My favourites on **merit**.

“**Mark**,” I addressed myself to a pale grungy boy sitting at the back, who was talking urgently to his sidekick, Tom, “I’m ready to start – your conversation, share it or shelve it, please.”

“I was just reminding Tom that today is the **anniversary** of Kurt Cobain’s death,” Mark didn’t miss a beat, “and I was wondering if we could maybe write about it for today’s lesson”.

“A veritable **mine** of information, aren’t you, Mark? Now, tell me,” my voice faux stern, “this class **yours**, is it? Or **mine**?”

“Yours, Sir”, Mark replied, faux surly, and allowed **coal** black hair to fall back over his eyes.

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I **fire** a look across the table at Jacko, but he’s got his head down, nervously splitting and restacking his chips; a solid player, though. Phil is dramatically **breathing** out a soft jet of cigar smoke through pursed lips, a cheap showman. The smoke spreads, drifts up, mingling with the purpling **air** by the exit sign, unnaturally bright in the gloom. Benny, deck lying inert as a paperweight now, has allowed a cultivated **bored** expression to settle over his jowly face. The expression of a **chairman** of a business, sitting through the same meetings year on year. But he’s got it down so well he doesn’t look **bored** so much as brain-dead. Benny derives great pleasure from the **fulfillment** of his dealer’s duties, but now his chubby fingers are resting, one hand laid on top of the other behind his stack.

I’ve lost a lot tonight; I have to find a hand or I’m **done**. I look at a grey smudge where I had **dusted** ash from the table, and then up at the others. Not a word from anyone. Phil, if he was a better player, should **clean** up here, his long stack giving him the muscle to push people around. But hope will **spring** eternal – all the better players are as short stacked as me.

I sip **water**. I **lack** concentration.

*She doesn’t **need** to tell me it’s been a while; it’s been almost three years. But that doesn’t stop an old **hunger** rising. She’s said five words, but I hear again the **constantly** shifting note of her voice. The **changing** colours of her words.*

The **room** is waiting. Johnson to **play**. He mucks his hand with a **violent** gesture and a snort, scattering chips. He’s a **thug**, and he plays his poker the same way – lords it over people when he’s winning, sulks when he’s losing. He’s not the first poker **hooligan** I’ve played against. But no poker game appreciates a **job**. Poker – like golf, cricket, or whatever – has its own **culture**; it’s a taciturn one, but there is a baseline of mutual respect. For each private game you have to pick up new game variants, adopt new house rules, new points of etiquette – I’d quickly had to learn how to **mould** myself to the culture of the game.

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High in the far corner, in my eyeline, a patch of **mildew** was spreading, making land-grabs for the wall and ceiling. I imagined a time-lapse film in which my classroom succumbed to the advancing **green** on the walls; window and door frames warped, **grass** snuck between cracks. Trees forced their slow way in, the room faded **green** to orange with the seasons. Birds nested on bookshelves; mice made a **house** of a filing cabinet. I saw our delusions of **power** swallowed up in this gentle invasion. I saw the **strength** of the system, the interdependency. There was a **bond** between the mouse and the sparrow-hawk that now sat on the back of my desk chair, talons piercing the red cloth. Eyes swept the ground to **spy**

movement; fixing on the twitching mouse he pushed himself into the air. The mouse tore for his **hole**.

A half-forgotten **memory** broke my fantasy of rampant nature, but took me to my country childhood. In iridescent light, as when the sun slants unseen through a gap in dark clouds, I saw myself surrounded by a carpet of **bluebells**. I was not quite eleven, gathering the **flowers** in the May rain, sweeping purple swathes into my arms. **Rain** poured along my eyebrows and down my neck, and I headed home. But as I got there, sodden **wet**, I saw myself falter. My triumph turned to guilt, and I watched as I flung the **wild** flowers into the hedgerow.