

True Lu

by Thomas Easterling

Televised poker is even more colorful and exciting than televised golf. The card players are young and have nicknames like Jesus or The Master or The Brat. Accountants and ambulance drivers enter tournaments and win more in a week than they otherwise would have for the rest of their lives, which has no shortage of appeal. Even the homeliest players cultivate an aura of desirability and self-confidence. Come play with me. Don't worry about the money—I'm just lucky, and you can be too.

The poker table at Luther Trulove's rent house, of course, looked nothing like the ones seen on TV, and it lacked insight from professional commentators, but that didn't keep Luther and his friends from playing each dollar-ante hand as if the fate of the free world depended on it, and asking the loser of each lay down what the hell he was thinking after it was complete. Luther's friends loved playing at his house because he let them smoke at the table and because he usually lost. Luther himself loved the game passionately at the beginning of each night—and loathed himself just as passionately in the end for being foolish enough to think he could actually win. Bad luck came his way in spades, and then hearts, diamonds and clubs.

But this time was different. They were playing with their Christmas bonuses—all of them except Dave Kelly worked at the same restaurant, and Dave got a bonus from his grandmother every month anyway—and Lu won every hand he played through.

They started at three, as soon as they closed the restaurant after lunch, and agreed to play until eight, when the restaurant opened again for its annual Christmas party. They started with anaconda, a high-low passing game that Lu liked because he could fold quickly when he didn't like his cards. But he liked them this time—he liked them a lot: an ace-to-five straight flush that would probably win both ways. When it was time to start rolling the cards over, Lu did everything he could to divert attention from the

cards. He knew he couldn't lose—it was just a matter of how much he would win.

“What do y'all think about the new waitress?”

“The little Hispanic girl?”

“I think she's Hispanic. Name's Magda, anyhow,” said Sam Scott, Luther's best friend.

“You know her name?” said Dave.

“It's embroidered on her work shirt, and I enjoy looking at her shirt every chance I get,” said Sam.

“I bet that's not all you plan to look at,” said Dom Riley. He was the chef's cousin, but had no nose for the business. He was just biding time, waiting tables and chasing waitresses until he could get out of school and into real estate—the market was absurd, almost recession-proof, just like in every other college town.

“Speaking of bet,” said Lu with a laugh, “what's the bet?”

“Pay attention, numb nuts. Two dollars to you.”

They made it to the fourth card before anybody even noticed that Lu might have a straight flush. There might have been thirty dollars in the pot

“He ain't got it,” said Dave, who was sitting to Lu's right. “I know what I passed him and it's all already on the table. No way he got three to a straight flush.”

Dave was hoping this was true. He either had four of a kind or the highest full house on the table—the last card would tell.

“Well, if you don't think I have it, you're going to have to pay to find out,” said Lu. It was hard not to stammer or smirk, because if he had they all would have folded. They all knew how easy it was to tell when he was excited. “I raise. Isn't the maximum five bucks?”

Huey and Sam folded—the first two to leave the game—but everyone else stayed in, confident that Lu was bluffing, and stunned to see that he had the goods.

“It's all right, boys,” said Dave. “We'll get it back in no time. We always do.”

“Maybe, but maybe not tonight,” said Lu, “For once in my life, my mojo is working.”

“Whoa—we're talking cards, not women,” said Sam. “I don't want to hear any more about anybody's freakin' mojo.”

Sam was not one to talk about mojos of any kind. Neither life nor women had ever told him no, so far as any of his friends knew, and they turned to him as if he was a god walking among them when they had problems with girlfriends or money. He and Lu had grown up together, from kindergarten to college graduation a couple of years ago, and had settled happily into the easy money made by working in a nice restaurant. Sam waited tables, Lu kept bar.

But Lu was full of himself that night, and every time he won a hand he repeated his refrain: “Boys, my mojo is working tonight.”

Every time he said this, Sam's face got a little redder. By seven, two veins began to bulge into a purple V beneath his widow's peak. By seven-thirty, he had borrowed fifty bucks from Dave. “Let's make this the last hand,” Sam said. “Hey Lu, let's make it something big so the rest of us will have a chance to win our money back?”

“What? Like 727?” Lu said. He wasn't fond of the game. He almost trembled at the memory of throwing money away on pots he lost by half a point.

“What about Hold 'Em with eight- and sixteen-dollar blinds?”

Lu, of course, was the sixteen-dollar blind, but he had been the big winner—he had maybe four hundred dollars in front of him, which had never happened before—so he agreed. “Table stakes?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Sam.

A couple of guys reached for their wallets. They had all seen Lu's luck run out before. Never on such a scale, perhaps, but they had faith that it would happen again.

Lu put down the big blind and tried not to act surprised when he saw pocket jacks. He must have done an adequate job

because everyone else at the table called the big blind. Sam even pretended to contemplate raising, but he only had about thirty dollars in front of him.

After the flop, ace-king-jack, Sam said, "Somebody better loan me some money, because at this point there's no way I can lose. I'll raise what I have and then some."

Lu looked at his cards again, then looked around the table. Sam was on his left, so the bet was coming his way: thirty-two dollars. Mike folded, but Dave and Huey called, which he read to mean that at least one of them had an ace or king, which in turn meant it was that much less likely that his three jacks could be beat. "I call," he said, voice cracking. Thirty-two dollars was about ten percent of what he'd won, and he didn't want to throw it away.

Fourth street was an eight, and Sam went up to sixty-four on the bet. Dave and Huey folded quickly.

"You ain't got shit," Lu said. "I call."

"Then raise," Sam said.

Lu rolled his eyes but did not move his hands to his stack. He had Sam read now: pocket aces tripled on the board. He didn't want to raise, but he was pot-committed, and there was a slim chance something good might come down the river.

It was a jack.

Sam assumed that the jacks would give him the best full house possible. When he bet the maximum, Lu was not surprised.

Sam was surprised, though, when Lu raised that much again. "You ain't got shit," he said.

"Do I look like Chris Moneymaker?" Lu said. "Plus, I got my mojo working."

"Fuck your mojo and let's raise again," said Sam. Lu had never needled him before. Sam looked disconcerted, Lu looked pleased.

"And the last raise is mine."

"Hey, Mike, can you loan me another two hundred?" Sam asked.

“Lemme look at your cards,” Mike said. Sam did, and Mike smiled. “Gimme a cut of the profit,” he said, digging into his wallet.

Lu peeked at his cards again. They were still jacks, and they still looked mighty nice.

“Do I need to put my money on the table?” he asked. “I got the nuts, boys, and we got to get to the restaurant, so I don't feel like counting all those—”

“I knew you didn't have shit,” said Sam. He started to rake the pot his way, laughing.

“Not so fast, my friend,” said Lu. “I call. And I really do have the nuts.”

Lu put his jacks on the table and looked over at Sam, whose face bore the expression of a pig on the kill floor right after it had been zapped and right before it died. “I'll be damned,” Sam said. “Why the hell did you stay in with three jacks after the flop?”

“Got my mojo working,” said Lu. “I doubted any of y'all would stay in without an ace or a king, so I didn't think there'd be anybody else paired up. I was wrong, but I was lucky.”

“Dude,” Sam said, “we got to get your ass to Tunica—tonight. I got to front you some money so we can win back everything I lost tonight.”

Lu looked at his pile of chips and smirked. “I don't think you'll need to front me anything tonight, Sambo. Let's put these chips away and get to the restaurant.”

Mike looked at Lu count his money and said, “Hell, if I were you Lu, I wouldn't go anywhere near Tunica. You got about a thousand bucks in front of you. You ain't going to get luckier than that. Not at cards, anyhow. Maybe you should try your luck with the ladies instead.”

“What band they got playing tonight?”

“Little Will and Big Love.”

“Goddamn, my ears'll be ringing for a week,” Lu said, “but they will definitely inspire my drunk ass to move on the dance floor. Look out, Magda.”

“Shit, brother, you better get in line,” said Sam. “I may be broke right now, but I can dance for free. Kindly consider one of the larger girls who will be there—they're always grateful for the attention.”

Sam delivered this wisdom with a laugh, but it cut nonetheless. Lu wanted to say something back, wanted to tell Sam that for once in his life he'd won at something and to let him savor it, but he bit his tongue. Lu knew he had long been typecast as the lovable loser. It was a safe role to play, even on a night when it didn't fit.

