

What Does Your Father Do?



WHEN A NORMAL CHILDHOOD WASN'T IN THE CARDS

BY RACHEL TEMPLETON

MY FATHER RAN AN ILLEGAL POKER game and I was his assistant, or what they call in the business, a floor girl. When I tell people this, at a time when poker is mysterious and sexy, they want to know more. It's strange because, when I was young, my father's poker operation was a source of embarrassment, emblematic of a childhood gone awry. Later I would ask myself why I let it happen.

The games were in a lopsided house called the Old Homestead, once yellow but faded to a neglected grey, the prevailing color of Anchorage. The Old Homestead had escaped commercial zoning on Fourth Avenue and sat in the center of downtown on a big, empty lot. Across Barrow Street was a cavernous bar popular with the native Alaskans. It was the kind of place, Dad says, where you could walk in during the day and there would be a hundred people inside, but it would be pin-drop quiet.

My dad took over the Anchorage poker business after he left Juneau, where I lived with my mom and new stepdad. In my early teens, Dad reunited with his high school girlfriend, a skinny, talkative woman named Gayle. The two of them made a living by fishing on my dad's salmon trawler. Dad also played local poker games, which he dominated, but one year both the fishing and the games dried up. So he and Gayle packed up his Oldsmobile, put the car on the ferry, and made a route north to Anchorage.

I visited my dad on school breaks. He never tried to hide anything from me, even though I think he worried I would rat him out to my mother or a friend with a parent in law enforcement. It was always implied that I was not to tell anyone about what I saw. For a long time, I didn't question his profession because what he did didn't strike me as unusual. And when I was old enough to understand that my dad made his living by breaking the law, I looked the other way. I didn't want it to come between us.

I am old enough now to look back with some perspective, to see that I always played the part of a good girl who did not ask why things couldn't be more normal. In a recent late-night phone conversation, I asked my dad about his days running the Old Homestead. I wanted to know how poker came to dominate his life, and why he let me become a part of it.

WHEN DAD AND GAYLE DROVE INTO ANCHORAGE, Hank Jeffreys owned the game. Dad started playing at his table. Hank was a four-hundred-pound diabetic on his last legs, and he wanted to sell the business. "It's a bird's nest on the ground," he told my dad. The business went for \$5,000 cash, plus monthly rent.

Hank had a reputation for cheating his players. When Dad and Gayle moved into the Old Homestead, they found blank, weighted dice in the dresser drawers. These could have been drilled to make dice that favored a particular number. "That's the way it was in Anchorage back then," Dad says. "Whoever was the best cheat got the money."

I first saw the Old Homestead during Christmas break in 1991. Dad and Gayle had moved in and fixed it up to reinvigorate the games, which had leveled off since Hank had gotten sick. Dad had a bright green card table shipped up from Las Vegas. Gayle replaced the Old Homestead's carpet, which was commercial grade, red, and ran up the walls clear to the ceiling. She put up dark green drapes in all the rooms. They tried without success to eradicate the smell of cigarette smoke.

THE FRONT AND BACK DOORS OF the house had one-way mirrors where windows should have gone. Dad called Gayle the bulldog at the door. When someone knocked, Gayle would peak through the curtains. Players who owed large debts didn't get in. When a tattooed enforcer from another game came to collect money from one of Dad's players, Gayle told him to get back in his limo and get lost.

When the police came, as they did several times, Gayle would yell, "Dave!" in a tone that Dad and the players understood. They had a routine. The dealer would sit down, the safe would close up, and the game would continue as if it were just among friends. The cops would walk up and down the stairs and look around. Gayle would offer them coffee. Dad would ask if the night was going well. The police had to prove that a rake—profit—was being taken in the game to make arrests, but this was difficult to prove, so they would eventually leave.

Dad had the most profitable game in town, with players winning or losing up to \$50,000 a night, but it was not the only one. Miss Hu, an Asian woman; Dick Raymond, an ex-jailbird who also ran strip clubs; and a nut named Luther also ran games. They all competed for players. To stay on top, Dad ran a series of tournaments where winners won big televisions. Luther fought back by taking out an ad in the *Anchorage Daily News*: "Poker! Friday night Poker! Call Luther!"

The ad got Luther busted when an undercover cop came to play at his game. "One night the cops came flying in with guns, took all the money and everyone to jail," Dad says. My dad protected himself from this scenario. "If someone new came to play, I'd ask for ID. 'Let me see your shit,' I'd say. I'd ask if they minded if I went through their wallet. If



The author on summer vacation with her father in Anchorage, September 1987.

they did, I told them they weren't welcome."

I was always nervous when I sat on the plane headed toward Anchorage, six hundred miles from Juneau. I knew my sleeping schedule would be out of whack when I came back to my mother. Dad's poker games could run for three days straight, especially the Christmas and New Year's games. When I was there, I at least tried to stay up until dawn. In the Anchorage winter, that could be 11 p.m. the next day. I also knew that when I came back, I couldn't tell my mother honestly about the trip, or why, if she had found them, I had wads of hundred-dollar bills in my jacket.

My job at the game was to help Gayle with the caring and feeding of players. She operated a full-service restaurant out of a trailer-size kitchen. We shopped every day for bulk quantities of meat, alcohol, and soda. Then we cooked all day. Typically, forty or fifty guys shuffled through the game each night, most of them lonely Vietnam vets craving a home-cooked meal.

Games began at 7 p.m. Angel, Dad's best dealer, would start Texas Hold 'Em. Dad sat at the head of the table, sold chips, and kept track of transactions on pads of yellow legal paper. I would walk around the table asking as sweetly as possible, "Would you like something to eat?" Then: "Tonight we have meatloaf, roast chicken, and fresh snapper." Then I would slink back to the kitchen to prepare plates. When I delivered food to a player's side table, I was to keep my eyes away from the table and especially from my father. He wanted everything in the game to look clean.

The players would leave their empty plates and tip us in chips, usually twenty dollars or so. Gayle and I stacked the chips in the kitchen pantry, and at the end of the game, Dad would cash us out at the safe. A few hundred dollars a night was average, but sometimes games were hot, and we could make up to \$1,000. Making money was the fun part of the game, but later I found out about what was happening behind the scenes.

THERE WERE DANGEROUS PLAYERS, LIKE THE ALBANIAN from Chicago. He came to Anchorage to set up a game with organized-crime money but instead lost twenty grand in a three-day game at the Old Homestead. “This guy told his buddies he got cheated in a poker game, so they flew out to Anchorage,” Dad says. “We had a meeting. There were a lot of implied threats about killing me. I had to think about what I was going to do. I thought about doing the same to them, to be honest.”

One year, I called Dad about scheduling summer vacation, but he told me to hold off. He had just been robbed. The house had been broken into and \$20,000 cash, mostly Gayle’s tips, had been stolen. All her jewelry and Dad’s pistol collection had been taken. Dad suspected someone in the game community was responsible, so he hired an unlicensed private investigator.

A competitor, Dick, had arranged the break-in. He was “an unscrupulous character, a nasty man,” Dad says. “This friend of Dick’s got out of jail, a guy known for murdering a few people and getting away with it. He told Dick if he wanted me out of the business, he would take care of it. Then we got robbed. I confronted Dick, and he said, ‘Well, I didn’t have him kill you, but I did have him rob you.’”

I feel sick hearing this. What should I say? I ask my father, “How could you put yourself at risk? Why didn’t you tell me then?” I have a memory of going back to school after break, kids bragging about their summer vacations, but I could reveal nothing. I admit to my dad that I secretly longed for a father who came home at six thirty, briefcase in hand. “I don’t blame you,” he says. “Those dads are dependable. But I wasn’t cut out for that. It wasn’t in the cards.”

My father is petrified of routine, of fitting a mold, of drowning in responsibility. You cannot nail him down for plans and you’d best not ask him for casual favors. Freedom is objective number one. He is opposed to the concept of marriage. When I ask him what traditional job he might have had, he says it pains him to even think about it. “When I was a young kid, I met a pool hustler that called everyone

who worked for someone else ‘grinders,’ ” Dad says. “That stuck with me. I never wanted to be a grinder.”

Poker became his life. In games he hosted after school, he dominated other players—minnows, he calls them, to his shark. In 1963, Dad and a high school friend drove to Nevada, madly reading *Beat the Dealer*—the first computer analysis of blackjack—on the way. The book taught them to count cards. “We had fake IDs and the casinos just thought we were cute kids,” Dad says. “Every day we won a thousand bucks. We kept winning and winning and winning, and eventually they became aware of what we were doing. We got banned from every place in Reno.”

Dad says Vietnam is a big part of his story. He came back from the war with a personal mission never to take orders or wait in line again. Then there were the “psychedelic experiences” after the war. “LSD saved my ass,” he says. “It showed me life was too short to live for someone else. I vowed I would never do something I didn’t want to do, and I made choices that preserved that lifestyle.” Did he want kids? “Not really,” he says. “But it was OK once it happened.”

There was a point many years ago when I realized I would be entirely justified if I were to cut off my relationship my father. I could stop visiting and stop coming home exhausted, disoriented, and disappointed. For years I got off the plane in

Anchorage full of resentment and then placed collect calls to my mother to express my misery. But I kept initiating the trips. After all, I had my dad’s laugh, his crooked smile, his handwriting. I admired the way people respected him. We had a tradition of devouring king crab over the kitchen sink.

Dad says involving me in his business was never something he questioned. “That was what I was doing,” he says. “What was I supposed to do, create an illusion for you?” He wants me to know it was a legitimate game. Lawyers, doctors, and politicians all came to play. There were drug dealers, too, but they knew better than to bring that to the Old Homestead. “We were trendsetters,” he says, just as I’m ready to change the subject. “We made damn sure our players were safe.” He repeats that he always protected the integrity of the game—the all-American game, he calls it.

In 1997, after six years at the Old Homestead, my dad decided to call it quits. It was 7 a.m., after a day-and-a-half game, and a few “stuckies”—players who refuse to give up—wouldn’t leave the table. “When this is over, I’m never coming back,” he said to Gayle. They sold the business, packed up the car, and headed south in search of a new project. Today he is a real estate developer.

