

Excerpt from

THE ONLY WAY TO PLAY IT

A NOVEL BY PETER ALSON

THE WORLD I'M WAKING UP TO

A single crowded table at the back of the club was lit up like a stage. I made my way past the darkened rows of empty tables, adrenaline coursing. D.J. nodded as I drew near. A couple of the other players did too, though no one said anything. A hand was underway, a mess of green and black chips scattered in the center of the felt. Little Moishe, a harried-looking Orthodox Jew, had a stack of twenty-five black hundred-dollar chips pushed out in front of his cards. His opponent, a sweet-faced nebbish known as Jersey Joe, shifted his gaze between Moishe and the board, an unrevealing assortment of five random cards. I quickly calculated about thirty-five hundred in the pot, not counting Little Moishe's unanswered bet.

"You want a call?" Joe asked.

"Depends on vot you have," Little Moishe said.

"I got shit, as usual. I'm just thinking it might be better than your shit."

"In dot case, if I vere in your shoes, I'd probably raise."

"Maybe I should," Joe said.

It was impressive, given the amounts of money involved and the fact that they'd been up all night, that Moishe and Joe were able to engage in such friendly banter.

Another minute passed. "What the fuck," Joe said finally, counting out twenty-five hundred. "It's only money." He pushed out the call.

Little Moishe sighed. "You're good. I've got only an ace." There was no ace on board, so he meant he only had ace-high.

"Ace what?" Joe asked.

Suddenly hopeful, Little Moishe said, "Ace-ten."

Joe took another look at his hand. After a moment that perhaps stretched out too long, he flipped over ace-queen.

Little Moishe was incensed. "Vot da fuck vas dat? You tryna to slow roll me?"

"I had to look."

"Unbelievable. You sonovabitch. How da fuck you make dot call?"

Jersey Joe shrugged, trying not to smile as he raked in and stacked the massive pile of chips. D.J. caught my eye, as if to say, *You see what's going on here? Why I called you?*

The dealer scrambled the cards, then scraped them together for another shuffle.

Mike K., an ex-boxer and one of the owners of the Lucky Seven, nodded in my direction. "You come to kibitz or play?"

"Can't I do both?"

"This is a little out of your league, Nathan, isn't it?" Lenny Garfinkle said.

"Why do you say that?"

Lenny was in his fifties and retired. He'd made a fortune in the medical-supply business and played poker strictly for entertainment. When he lost, which was most of the time, he still managed to project an attitude that in the game of life he was so far ahead of you that your little victory against him at cards barely counted.

"It just seems to me like you could get hurt," Lenny said.

"I'm touched that you care, Lenny."

"Who says I care?" Lenny laughed. He looked like a suburban country-club swell with his full head of white hair and bright red V-neck sweater over a starched white shirt and khakis.

I took the empty seat at the table between Mike K. and Fonzie.

The dealer, a long-haired kid called Stevie Drummer, said, "How much you behind?"

I looked at the stacks. D.J. hadn't been lying. There was easily a hundred and fifty thousand on the table. "Ten thousand," I said.

"Chips!" Stevie yelled across the floor to the guy behind the desk.

"Gimme your money, I'll take it up," Mike K. said, rising from his seat.

I counted out the ten grand from my roll and handed it to him. It was a slightly sick feeling, seeing my roll nearly halved like that. Mike K. headed off toward the desk.

Stevie dealt to all the stacks including my nonexistent one. The action folded around to me on the cutoff. I picked up my cards by one corner, lifting them only high enough to get a peek, cupping them with both hands. King-queen suited. My heart pumped. I hadn't really wanted to get a playable hand so quickly, but what the fuck could you do?

"Raise," I said. "One and a quarter."

"Comes right out firing," Russian Eddie said.

It folded around to Lenny Garfinkle on the big blind.

He looked at his cards and tossed out three black and two green chips, a reraise to \$350.

I felt as if Lenny was trying to test me right off the bat. Obviously, I couldn't fold. I had a decently strong hand, plus position. But already I was being made to grapple with the size of the stakes. Could I play my regular game or would I be too intimidated? Should I make a statement out of the gate, raise back, make it clear I wasn't going to be bullied?

Lenny was a pure psycho, though. If I sent in a four-bet, Lenny was capable of firing right back at me with nothing just because it would give him a thrill—and then I'd have to fold because I wasn't going to Defcon Four with just king high. Calling was the prudent play.

"Here, this'll make it easier," Fonzie said. "Until your chips come." He slid me nine pink \$1,000 chips and ten black \$100s.

"Thanks, Fonz." I threw four of my newly acquired black chips in the pot and received \$50 in change.

Stevie pulled in the chips, extracting a couple for the house cut, then burned a card and spread the flop. King, queen, deuce, with two hearts.

I tried not to betray anything, but I could feel my heart banging away under my flimsy blue T-shirt. I'd flopped a monster. Adding to my excitement, Lenny led out right away for \$500.

I took a moment to consider. It was perfectly reasonable to assume that Lenny was just making a standard continuation bet, trying to take down the pot with nothing. If that was the case and I raised, Lenny would undoubtedly fold. The other possibility was that he had a real hand like ace-king, even aces. Either that or he had a straight draw or flush draw or some combination of the two. There was one other possibility: he flopped a set of deuces or (less likely given my hand) a set of queens or kings.

All these thoughts ran through my mind in speeded-up time as I tried to decide on the correct play. Calling made the most sense, because apart from

the flush and straight draws, the only turn cards I was really afraid of were an ace or a deuce. I was almost certainly ahead at this point and if I raised and Lenny folded, I was losing value by denying Lenny the chance to fire another bullet on the turn. On the other hand, if I raised, it would allow Lenny to make a mistake with a worse hand. In the end, that was what swung the balance: Lenny's propensity for overplaying hands and making ill-advised bluffs.

"Raise," I said as if slightly annoyed. "Eighteen hundred."

Before I could even put my chips out, Lenny said, "All in."

The speed and decisiveness of his declaration, in combination with his smug little smile, threw me. This was exactly what I had hoped would happen, but now that it had, a speck of doubt entered my mind. I glanced down at my chips. I was almost certain I was going to call the bet, but I wanted to slow down and think things through. I had eight thousand left, after all. Eight thousand real dollars that could purchase food and pay rent and tuition. Lenny couldn't possibly have a set, could he?

No, as far as I was concerned, he either had aces, ace-king or a flush and/or straight draw. That or he was just pushing an out-and-out kamikaze bluff. But even Lenny wasn't that sick, was he? Either way . . .

"I call," I said. But before the dealer could deal the final two cards, I stopped him. "Are we doing anything?"

It was common in big hands like this to do business after all the money went in, to spread out the risk a bit by dealing the final cards more than once, each outcome settling a third or a half of the pot, depending on what the players agreed to. I was always amenable to business as a way to spread out the risk.

Unfortunately, Lenny wasn't. The more pain he could inflict on you the better. "Deal it once," he said.

"You sure you don't want to run it a couple of times?" I said, perhaps a bit more plaintively than intended. I had a sudden and overwhelming sense of dread.

"Once," Lenny instructed the dealer.

Stevie Drummer burned and turned a four and I felt the beginnings of relief. I watched as Stevie paused dramatically before he burned and turned the river. And boom there it was, the one card I didn't want to see—a miserable rat-fucking ace. Lenny immediately turned over his hand, an ace and a king, just as I'd thought.

It was like a freak accident, a finger lost in a paper shredder, a knife dropped on a barefoot. I stared at that ace, trying to take it in and absorb it. Then searing pain and I wanted to scream.

Mike K. arrived back at the table while Lenny was still stacking. "Ten thousand," he said, handing me a rack with ten pink chips in it.

"Actually, you can give them to me," Fonzie said.

"You're kidding," Mike K. said.

"Unfortunately, he isn't," I said.

"First hand?"

I nodded with a feeble laugh.

"Should I go back to the desk?"

Good question. Losing ten gees the first hand was about as clear a sign to quit and go home as you could get. I still had \$12K left in my roll. If I took off a couple of days to lick my wounds and get over my momentary lapse of sanity, that would be sufficient capital to go back to grinding the \$5-\$10 game. The only requirement was for me to swallow my pride right now in front of these assholes.

"Give me ten more," I heard myself saying.

"Ten more it is," Mike K. said, heading back to the front desk.

And that was how it happened. That was how you went over the cliff.