

THE POKER CLUB

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For Evan Hunter and Richard Matheson,
who have taught me so much,
and so thoroughly entertained me while doing it.



WE ARE looking at three men sitting around a poker table. My name is Aaron Tyler and I'm the man in the middle, the slender one with the slightly receding hairline and the sort of sad smile on my face. My wife Jan always says that I never look sadder than when I smile. My mother used to say the same thing to me. The guys in boot camp kidded me about that, too. After college, I enlisted in the Marines. There were no wars to fight. But having grown up in the shadow of a fierce older brother, I guess I had some things I needed to prove to myself and my parents. And after three years as a gyrene, I felt I'd proved them.

The black gentleman is Curtis Reeves. Curtis and I both work at the same law office and are about the same age, early forties. You can see that Curtis makes very animated faces when he's checking out his hand. Right now, for instance, he seems to be whispering to his cards with a certain amount of unmistakable glee.

The more dour gentleman to Curtis' right is Dr. Bill Doyle, MD. In his college days, Bill damned near made All Big 10 his junior year. He's stayed in good shape and he's still got all the old fire. Too much fire, sometimes. There's a bully side to him that you occasionally see, and it's never fun to watch.

You'll notice that there's one chair empty. This is where Neil Solomon usually sits. Neil is an attorney. He's been a good friend for just about twenty-five years, ever since an upperclassman beat the shit out of us at a kegger our freshman year.

You'll meet Neil in a few minutes.

For now, I just want to show you what we look like right before our lives change abruptly and forever.

Because that's what's going to happen.

Four pretty average middle-class guys are about to leave their comfortable old lives behind.

Forty-eight minutes from now.

Forty-eight minutes....



1

I CAN'T remember now who had the first poker game. But somehow over the past five years it became a ritual that we never missed.

We took turns having the game once a week. Beer and bawdy jokes and straight poker. No wild card games. We hate them.

This was summer, and vacation time, and with Jan and the girls gone, I offered to have the game at my place. With nobody there to supervise, the beer could be laced with a little bourbon, and the jokes could be even bawdier. With the wife and the girls in the house, I'm always at least a little intimidated.

The trouble is, of course, as much fun as I have playing cards, I really start missing Jan and the kids after a few days. Some nights I go in and lie on the girls' beds, with the clean scent of their hair still on their pillows. And then I think of how much I love them. And then I feel a tenderness so overwhelming it almost scares me. Then the fun I have at the poker games doesn't seem like so much fun at all.

CURTIS AND BILL came together, bearing gifts, which in this case meant the kind of sexy magazines our wives did not want in the house in case the kids might stumble across them. At least that's what they say. I think they sense, and correctly, that the magazines might give their

spouses bad ideas about taking the secretary out for a few after-dinner drinks, or stopping by a singles' bar some night.

We got the chips and cards set up at the table, we got the first beers open (Bill chasing a shot of bourbon with his beer), and we started passing the dirty magazines around with tenth grade glee. The magazines compensated, I suppose, for the balding head, the bloating belly, the stooping shoulders. Deep in the heart of every hundred-year-old man is a horny fourteen-year-old boy.

All this took place, by the way, in the attic. The four of us got to know each other when we moved into what city planners called a "transitional neighborhood." There were some grand old houses that needed a lot of work.

The city designated a ten square block area as one it wanted to restore to shiny new luster. Jan and I chose a crumbling Victorian. You wouldn't recognize it today. And that includes the attic, which I've turned into a very nice den.

"Pisses me off," Bill Doyle said. "He's always late."

And that was true.

Neil Solomon was always late. Never by that much but always late nonetheless.

"Just relax," I said. "Drink a beer."

"Yeah," Curtis said. "Or choke your chicken."

"Or," I said. "Squeeze your blackheads."

"Right," Curtis said, his handsome black face grinning. "Or pick your nose the way you usually do when you think we're not looking."

"You assholes," Bill said. And then started laughing. "You are really a pack of idiots, you know that?"

"Look who's talking," Curtis smiled. "The heavyweight boxing champion of Manor Street."

As a doctor, Bill is a gentle, charming and extremely competent man, the bully side completely hidden. He once saw my daughter through a really frightening spell of rheumatic fever.

"You have to admit," Bill said. "I've been doing a lot better."

"Yes, he has," Curtis said. "He hasn't punched out a nun for at least two weeks."

Bill could be a crazy sonofabitch, but at least he had the ability to laugh at himself. He was laughing now.

“You jerk-off,” he said to Curtis.

Curtis gaped down at one of the dirty magazines open on the poker table and said, “You know, jerking off doesn’t sound half-bad right now.”

“Hey,” I said, snapping my fingers. “I know why Neil’s late.”

“Yeah, so do I,” Bill said. “He’s at home swimming in that new fucking pool of his.” Neil recently got a bonus that made him the first owner of a full-sized pool in our neighborhood. “Aaron’s the one who should have the pool. He was the swimming star in college.”

“Neil’s got Patrol tonight,” I said.

“Hey, that’s right,” Curtis said. “Patrol.”

I forgot,” Bill said. “For once, I shouldn’t be bitching about him, should I?”

Patrol is something we all take seriously in this newly restored “transitional neighborhood.” The burglaries started eight months ago and they’ve gotten pretty bad. My house has been burgled once and vandalized twice. Bill and Curtis have had curbsitting cars stolen. Neil’s wife Becky was surprised in her own kitchen by a burglar.

The absolute worst incident, though, happened just four short bloody months ago, a man and wife who’d just moved into the neighborhood, savagely stabbed to death in their own bed. The police caught the guy a few days later trying to cash some traveller’s checks he’d stolen after killing his prey. He was typical of the kind of man who infested the neighborhood after sundown: a twentyish junkie stoned to the point of psychosis on various street drugs, and not at all averse to murdering people he envied and despised. He also knew a whole hell of a lot about fooling burglar alarms.

After the murders, there was a neighborhood meeting and that’s when we came up with the Patrol, something somebody’d read about being popular back East. People think that a nice middle-sized American city like ours doesn’t have major problems. I invite them to walk many of these streets after dark.

They’ll quickly be disabused of that notion.