

May 81

"So let me see your cards. Let's see if you play right," Fred pointed at my cupped hands with his nose.

Obediently I opened my cards for him and most of the table to see. My father chuckled. The three men folded their cards.

Fred said nothing, eyes twinkling as he gathered the deck and began to shuffle them.

When the four of us had cards again, Fred repeated, "Let's see again--your cards, if they right."

Frowning, I showed my five cards and this time the players groaned before tossing in their cards. I looked quizzically at my dad.

Every week or so, my father played poker with friends who filled the house with cigar smoke and brandied-breath, laughter and noise.

I was eight years old then; I wanted to learn cards, poker, gambling. At first, the players laughed, the men, some women. But I was determined. I'd squeeze under someone's arm and watch what was being played, in what order. There are very specific rules I learned right away. You don't point at a card fully-colored with elaborately dressed ladies or men and ask aloud if "that one is more important than that little one;" adults shoo you from the room then.

When the game was intense & quiet,

So I learned silence. I'd wait till the relaxed, noisely foot-suffling period when cards were given back to the main person, the dealer, they said.

"Show me the pictures! Tell me again! Not the numbers, I know them!" and the dealer could not refuse.

He or she would patiently show that three kings beat two queens and two jacks, a full house beat three kings, etc. ADD (A)

This particular day the women had bowed out of playing poker and the three men sat, mumbling silently, smoking, Fred switching his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

I had sidled up to my dad's elbow and finally asked timidly, "Can I play?"

They had all exchanged looks, shifted positions, coughed but finally consented. I was probably a welcome element of variety in odds to their somewhat boring game.

So Fred dealt and went into his routine of getting me to show my cards.

The third time, though, I glanced at my dad who sat immobile as if to say, "Well, figure out what's happening,"

I smiled shyly at Fred and shook my head. No, I would not show my cards.

I braced myself. They didn't throw me out on my ear. They didn't grab my cards away. They kept playing. I did, too.

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We played ^{a few} ~~the~~ hands, me dreading any turn where I dealt. My little fingers could not wrap themselves around the deck, 52 slick and greasy coated cards that seemed to jump out of my hands and embarrass me and give the other something to laugh at.

Add A

"Beat? You mean 'goes over'?" even then I rearranged issues for my own understanding.

"Yeah," Jo, Fred's wife, sucked her cheeks in for a big draw on her cigarette, "It 'goes over,' okay? Now I gotta deal, honey..."

I loved to watch dealers deal, mostly the shuffling part: two-handed, sideshuffles, the shuffle like an accordion, once in, once out.

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I'd show them next time, I determined mentally. Bib next door knew all sorts of kid card games and she knew all the shuffles, too. I'd have her teach me.

The last hand of the game was rather dramatic. I knew it might be the last hand when the men stretched and looked at the clock.

Poker players are a strange lot. You could tell ~~axx~~ pretty much about people when they played poker. The "poker face" donned for special plays seemed incongruous to the rest of body language. Fred, for instance, would shift his cigar; my dad would hum; Marino would jiggle his knee.

When dealing, Marino and my dad would silently throw out cards at an arm's length, my dad sometimes punctuating each throw with a sound umph! There! Fred was the showman. He'd yak it up all the time, "Okay, ladies and gents, place your bets...could be an ace, could be a deuce...read 'em and weep..." He'd toss the cards high in the air as he held his hands in close to his chest. I was going to learn that, too, I thought, dealing close. It looked quite effortless.

Anyway, we were given our five cards; I watched incredulously as I was dealt a 10 heart, queen heart, jack heart, king club, and 9 club.

Quick, I told myself to pretend nothing had happened. Everyone else looked listless, bored. I had a royal straight and obviously they had nothing that could beat that.

What to do: how could I keep those cards and not give the game away with the discards, or lack of them.

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There was a big pot of pennies in the center of the table. My dad had supplied pennies for me, but I played them myself, frugally, one at a time.

At least I did till this game.

Silently, Fred opened the bet: two pennies. Marino matched. My dad reached for three pennies, thinking for sure I'd fold as usual.

But I clumsily fingered two pennies and placed them in the pot. Everyone shifted in their seats.

Jo entered the room, her hair high, black-bouffanted, grey coat over her shoulders. She was pulling on white gloves as she held between her red lips her ever-present cigarette. Mom stood at her side.

I became very nervous, with all these people watching. Maybe I wasn't playing right. Maybe I shouldn't have tried this gutsy-type betting.

My dad placed his bet but added a penny.

Fred uttered a high-pitched sound in his throat, so typical of Filipinos expressing surprise. He threw in a penny. Marino folded.

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I fingered a penny, lost it in my sweaty grasp and picked up two more. All three fell before I let them go.

"You know what you're doing?" Fred chuckled.

My mom tried to peek over my shoulder. I held the cards close to my chest.

"I-I see and raise you two," I chattered nervously.

"Betterfold, Jim," ~~xxxxxx~~ Jo teased my dad, "She may have something."

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He was smiling oddly, like maybe I did have something, or maybe I was just a dumb eager kid.

"You raising, huh?" he said, "If you beat me, you want all those pennies? You didn't start off with any of your own pennies, remember."

"If I win, I'll just know I won," I said.

Everyone smiled behind hands.

"Okay," he pushed two pennies ahead, "I'll match and raise[#] you four."

I got confused then but watched Fred add six pennies, "I gotta see this."

I subtracted two in my head from ~~my~~ my dad's original six and counted out four pennies.

"Okay," I said.

My dad looked around at everyone's faces at the table. One by one he put out a 10 spade, queen spade, jack spade; he waited, then king spade and finally 9 spade.

Everyone whistled, "Whew! You must have it! Can't beat that! Royal flush, honey, can you beat that?"

They were already folding cards, Fred threw in his three of a kind; Jo applied more lipstick.

"How 'bout these?" I could barely be heard above the din.

They stopped when I put my five cards face up in a stack and fanned slowly: 10 heart, jack heart, queen heart, king heart, and a singularly beautiful ace of hearts.

Fred hooted. Marino slapped his face. My dad was smiling so hard I thought his jaw would break.

Everyone spoke at once, voices, rumbling baritones with high wavering tones.

"She did it!" Fred bellowed, "She beat you, Jim! Too bad they're only pennies, eh, Nan-ay?"

His musical foreign voice inflected softly upward with my name, as he always lapsed back into dialect when excited.

When things calmed down and the players made movements to leave I asked, "Don't I still get the pennies?"