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PASSING THE ACE

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THE ACE OF HEARTS

Our table rarely seats the same people, but it's been unchanged for a while now. An unsteady pine slab that the Queen of Hearts found worthy of her kitchen court. She's there, my mother, having moved the bench to wheel up her office chair. Her father, the Ace of the suit, often seats himself at the head, framing his scruff and baldness with the natural light of the windows behind him. He taps his cards and checks them periodically with exasperated huffs.

My Grandfather, the Ace of Hearts, is self-built. His kingdom of knick-knacks and random auto parts was made piece by piece, hour by hour. A childish grump and a tomcat if I ever met one. I love the man and I respect that he's self-built and hardworking, but he also dates 30-year-old women. For perspective, all four (or possibly 6) of his kids are over 30. Maybe that's not the worst thing, after all, they're all adults, but he has a nice, age-appropriate woman already; Olga, La As de Oros. She's not my grandmother, but she's kind and sincerely in love with the man who openly breaks her heart on repeat. She says she's done with him, but she loves him too much to go. My grandmother had no such problems leaving him to his pursuits. They get along well enough now.

My earliest memories of my Grandfather come from long before I understood what it meant to cut a deck. I remember a town different from my own. The houses stretched endlessly down the street in either direction, I remember what I can only call a pool-barn, the screeching cry of one of his precious granddaughters, and, for whatever reason, the taste of grass. I hear an ice cream truck too.

None of that resonates with the man I see at the table. The smell of oil and coffee waft across to me. I check my cards, I don't know what he has in his hand, or anyone else for that matter. I have nothing. "I fold.

THE KING OF HEARTS

The game is Five Card Draw, so half the table has folded before me. The King of Hearts looks at his hand, failing to hold back a grin. He lets his amusement out saying, "I'll bet—two," with an innocent chuckle. He more than likely has nothing, but his consistent reactions make for a good bluff.

My father, this King is more than just his love, he has 101 personalities, and one specifically for card games. He is blatantly honest, though I believe he could lie through his teeth if he wanted, and he has 2 talents for every personality. He could've done anything with his life, I'm sure. If given the push in his youth he could sing before the greatest courts, cook for the grandest feasts, or be listed among the names DaVinci and Michelangelo.

I asked him once why he wasn't an artist or a cook, and he told me he didn't like cooking or drawing. I almost believed him. I walked into the Kwik Fil once to find him doodling on post-it notes behind the counter. I don't remember exactly what the cartoon was, I believe it was a cat with some nice calligraphy above it. After he rang us up for gas, I took the doodle home and put it on the fridge. Later that day I wanted him to teach me, and my cartooning is fairly good now, but I remain an unteachable calligraphist. A little college would have brought my father's many geniuses to fruition, but an Unsuted Ace had found him worthless.

AN UNSUITED ACE

I am familiar with my father's old table, the one he used years ago but never called his own. It was a family table, round and ruffed in a ragged yellow kitchen. An Arthurian scholar may call attention to the symbolic equality held by the image, but equality was absent from that table. The table of a wicked Ace, my paternal grandmother, who seated herself high, had only enough love for one of her 4 children. Her husband, who fell into the same oppression the other children were born into, still stood high. My grandfather kept his court together, safe, and cared for despite the wickedness of his wife and daughter. He fought until the day he died, and in the end, the wicked withdrew themselves to the shadows. I don't hate them, should they come to me, should they need me, or should they want to see my face, I will be there because he would have

wanted me to. Yet because of their anger, we cannot love them the way we used to. And because of her wickedness, she remains an Unsuted Ace.



THE COURT OF SPADES

Anger is absent from our table as my father reveals his hand; he hadn't bluffed. He gathers his winnings and feeds some of his colorful plastic funds to those whose piles have dwindled. I may be among those taking a stack or two. At some point, my uncle Paul, the King of Spades, gets the deck, probably after downing three and two half beers, I guess he only wanted the top halves. I know the game before it comes, and I hate it. So does his Queen. She scoffs, "I'm sitting out." She goes outdoors to smoke, and though I can't see her from my seat, I know her hands are trembling to keep that cigarette to her lips. The King shrugs as if he's surprised that she didn't want to play, then he drops the first cards for In-Between.

I know their table too. I see no joy, nor sorrow there. There is art, but no meaning. Cluttered with all manner of things; from stained glass slabs to eBay watches, it's an unruly and ever-changing table. The Jack and Jill of Spades rather eat on the couches not far away and I am faced with the overwhelming silence that rarely fills the space. I hate it there.

The Jack and the Jill hate the table too, the King just affords it. The Queen seems attached to it, yet I believe she hates it most of all. I don't know what it's like to be a prisoner in your own castle, but she knows the door is unlocked and no one is keeping her there. When the

others leave that table the grief of their Queen peruses them. They bicker with each other, they bicker with others, and they bicker with themselves, or at least the kids do. They all have anxiety, two medically diagnosed, and they all have dependency issues, all diagnosed by me. Still, I have a sort of familial love for each of them.

THE KING OF SPADES

The King has always been in my life and his love never came from obligation. I have found him sometimes in our court, thinking no one would be home. He would sit, drink, do the dishes if there were any, and just relax. I wouldn't call it intruding. Escaping is a better word. He did it, so I ask myself, "Why won't his Queen?"

THE QUEEN OF SPADES

The Queen of Spades can be fun-loving. It's true. Though she much prefers to wallow. She was the only adult who would ever come play tag with the kids in our grand family. I don't mean 'tag-your-it! *Chuckle, chuckle.*' No. We played *tag* in our vast palace gardens. We would wait for the lands to fall into darkness, choose our armies, and if it could be called war, then this Queen, short and scrawny as she may have been, was a tank. She wasn't above causing pain to win, nor did she expect us to hold back on her account. Needless to say, we would all come back inside with some mild scrapes and bruises.

THE JACK AND JILL OF SPADES

I grew up with the Jack and Jill of Spades. I was closer with them, my cousins, than I was with my own brother for a long time, but no one gets on my nerves faster. Call it a love-hate

relationship or let me love them from a distance. They have their own sad kingdom, but they are welcome to mine so long as they leave the pitiful sorrow behind.

The Jill sits at our table too, but the Jack won't stomach the game.

THE ACE OF SPADES

As my turn comes, I bet on my chances. The King of Spades sets a 2 and 10 before me. A collective 'ooh' rises from the table. I bet six. He flips the card. A Jack. "Dang." There go three game antes. My chips skim through a ring of water as I toss them to the center of the table. My grandmother's water bottle was there before she left, and I took her seat, the throne at the end of the table opposite my grandfather. The Ace of Spades is a wonderful woman, and I'm not just saying that because she's my grandmother. For Christmas she bakes cookies for all her kids and grandkids, even those not of her own blood, she loves the lord, and she works harder than anyone I know. At 70 herself she works taking care of the elderly. I'm not the only one who tells her not to work so hard, or to point out the irony, but I'm the only one who I know for certain is inspired by her.

I remember her table. In a small kitchen lit with small windows and decorated to the fullest extent. A happy hall filled with delectable aromas. She smiles at us with a halo of bleached curls. My cousins and I, her Jacks and Jills, have come to spend time with her and decorate the cookies for this year. The colors she brings don't vary; blue, pink, green, yellow, and white. Not a dark sprinkle can be found in the endless collection, no more could a rotten thought be found in her boundless love. She's not often at the table, and if she is, she doesn't win, and she always excuses herself early, leaving that single wet ring from her water bottle.

She makes me smile. She sees me walking down the road or coming home for a night and her face lights up, my own reflects it. She waddles over to me and wraps me in hugs that only reach above my waist. She looks up at me like a child and tells me how precious I am to her. It's a funny image, but I look around the table where I sit, and no face compares to hers.



THE QUEEN OF CLUBS

The only good thing about In-Between is that it requires little attention. A few of us get up from the table and pick at what's left from the earlier feast. We patiently play in turn. The game could be two minutes or two hours, there's no telling. During the lull, talking starts in the court. The Queen of Clubs talks to my father about rum. The King of Hearts likes rum, but he's not a heavy drinker. The Queen of Clubs likes rum.

She has probably made a jab or two by now at her youngest sister, who you know as the Queen of Spades. She looks at her, her dyed red hair pulled back and her eyes cold in rum and judgment, "you look like Death." She wasn't lying, but I wasn't about to say that. The two are not the best of friends, but they get along enough to sit at the table and create some awkward moments for the rest of us. Her majesty of Clubs is one of many odd cards in the deck our family was given. She's the daughter of a mistress, born of one of the two affairs my grandfather was having before the loving Ace of Spades left him.

She has always been family, never the odd one out despite her oddity. My aunt Teresa. She sometimes seems to view herself as a Joker; disposable, unnecessary, and unwanted, but *I* know that without her, the deck is incomplete. You can't have a royal flush without the Queen. If I've learned anything from her, it is that family is more than a blood percentage.

I remember when the twins were born. They were a conglomeration of everything I knew at the time. They alone were born in the same hospital I had been while living on the same street I had been, and into the same family that only then became so close. Anthony and Jeremiah were inspiring from their birth and even more after these six years. The Queen of Clubs added two cards to her five-card hand, and that's a beautiful way to start a round of Seven Card Stud.

THE COURT OF CLUBS

In-Between ends, and the awkward moments die. My Uncle Shamar, The King of Clubs gets the deck, he nods to the Jill of Spades, "What are we playing?"

"I don't care," she says with a shrug, bored of the game. The youngest at the table is Donavan, the Third Jack of Clubs. He throughs out a suggestion and the King, his father, declines without a second thought.

Their table is bipolar. I can put it no other way. The green-tiled art piece can radiate the same joy of our table or the same misery of that of the spades. The table is large and wobbly, made to seat all seven of their court plus guests. I've found myself the winner at that table time and time again, yet I would never trade for it.

THE KINGS OF CLUBS

My Uncle and I get along well, and we like the same games. “High Low,” I offer. He points at me with a jubilant, “Yeah, sounds good. High Low.” He looks up at the ceiling to remember how the game’s dealt, then starts with the cards. I’ve always found it easy to talk to this King, unlike the King of Spades. Again, we share no blood, but I would stand by his side sooner than I would stand by any other of the high cards at the table. He’s not perfect, but he’s grounded and stable in an unstable world and an unstable family at his unstable table.

THE MANY JACKS OF CLUBS

Most of their Jacks are never at our table. The first and second have found better things to do, and the fourth and fifth are too young to play. But the third Jack would never miss being at the table. Donovan gets the short end of the stick a lot. In a deck stacked with athletes and ex-athletes, he is out of place. He likes cooking and he’s fascinated by the world. His curiosity is probably the reason I’m so close to him. He’s 5 years younger than me. Most kids his age, I can’t stand them. They irritate me, to say the least, but I can talk to him the way I talk to any of my peers. I never had a little brother, so I guess he’s always been my supplement for that. It’s funny to think of us as friends; the Third Jack of Spades and the Second Jack of Hearts, we’re polar opposites if you look at the cards.



THE FAR DIAMOND COURT

They are not at the table, but they play the games even now on a table of their own. Their deck has been shuffled more than once. We find ourselves there sometimes at that table. The plastic tokens are gone away for metal coins, as is their preference. The King of Diamonds is balding, his second Queen jitters. Between them are 3 Jills and a Jack, who gladly sit at the table. It's large and round, centering a grand hall framed in motorbikes and stuffed trophies.

I can't talk about their faraway kingdom without acknowledging my fear of the place. I love the King and his Queen, though one of the Jills I wouldn't mind missing, but they are not the source of my fears. There is something about the palaces they live in, something odd and disturbing. Perhaps I had taken myself too far from my own table or read one too many books about odd occurrences in the state. Either way, I'm content not to roam their grand and mysterious halls daily.



THE SECOND JACK OF HEARTS

My father and mother have brought me up to appreciate what we have in her humble kingdom. I was taught to love the Clubs for Clubs and the Spades for Spades, not to judge the tables or the hands we had no choice in receiving. Yet how can I play the game without looking for flaws in their faces? How can I sit here and expect to show love when I must conceal my emotions to win? They taught me that the game ends, but the family doesn't. They told me that family would leave an impression. Yet isn't family just a game? A deck we have been given? A

hand we have been dealt? I won't be affected by the Two if I throw it out of my hand, nor will the Ace help me if I forsake it. The cold truth is that it is better to be holding a Pair of Threes than to come down to the call with an Ace, a King, a Queen, a Jack, and a Nine. If the family is a hand, why not make the hand better? If life is about winning, why keep useless cards just because it looks right?

“Tristan,” someone calls me back to the table, “Your deal.” The deck has finally reached me, I shuffle the cards. I struggle to make the bridge, but I manage. I consider the people playing. What might throw the Ace and the Queen, and what would the Kings want me to play? What would I like to play? What might push me to the pot? I would love to play High Low, it's a game I often make bank on, but we have dealt it twice now. I finally say, “Three stacks of three. Bumps and trips.”

The game is Pass the Ace. The goal of the game is not to get a perfect hand, but to decide whether each card is too risky to keep, or too safe to pass up. It's a perfectly fun game, but the dealer never wins.