



Cribbage

Pamela Huber

My roommates have agreed to let me teach them the rules of cribbage to pass time during the pandemic.



[image info](#)

SUMMER CALLS FOR CARD GAMES ON the front porch during late nights when the sun doesn't set until after nine, and my roommates have agreed to let me teach them the rules of cribbage to pass time during the pandemic. I've searched my house for my old cribbage board: a simple rectangle of elm wood the length of two packs of cards and narrower than one; on the back of the board, a small silver sliding door covering the peg compartment where two gold and two pewter pegs glint back; around the top like a racetrack, 121 carefully drilled pairs of holes. But the old board is missing. It is not with our board games or among my camping gear. It is not in my car trunk or miscellany drawer or hobbies basket. It has vanished, like all good things, just when I need it.

I grab a deck of cards, a scrap of paper, and a pencil; we will track points the old-fashioned way. My roommates learn easily enough without the board, but I miss the rhythm and routine of pegging, the glory in reaching over the table to claim each stolen

two or three points earned from careless opponents revealing their hand. I bought my board for three dollars from an antiques shop in Santa Cruz the summer after college. I didn't even know how to play the game then, but my father did, and I thought this small investment would let me grow closer to him.

I rarely saw Dad at ease with others. He was always either secluding to his books alone or trying to perform for patients and fishing buddies by cracking jokes in his booming voice. But out on the back patio with Scott, his best friend from childhood, I saw how Dad could relax, settle into an easy pace. I'd watch the two adults as they took turns flipping cards, moving pegs, saying "dirt," "double dirt," "four no more," "14 big warrior points!"

At first they played on the front porch on a large wooden stump with its top polished flat into a board, but wasps took up residence in it when I was eight. So they relocated with Dad's traveling board to the back patio. Scott would have a beer in hand; my father, an iced

tea. Their back and forth name-calling with each round was to me the soothing sound of summer. When they were in their forties, they scraped Mom's blue iron chairs, to her horror, against the concrete patio. The golden retriever, Scarlett, would play with a tennis ball in the grass. She'd lay on her back and roll the ball down along front legs shining golden in the sun into her gaping, waiting mouth; then she'd pinch the ball between her paws and draw it up again, then let it slide once more down the chute of her legs to catch it. Occasionally, she'd miss her mouth and the sound of the ball hitting the earth could be heard between Dad and Scott's ribbing.

The summer I turned fourteen and my sister, Jen, graduated high school, my parents threw a big party in the backyard and replaced the concrete patio with a stone one, shaped like a kidney bean with an even, black border. I planted four sun-powered lanterns around the edges. My parents spent two days rolling out new grass to cover the spots the dog had worn out running circles.

And over the years the patio dirtied and was power washed, leaving behind discernible looping white traces of the water's path on the stones, and the stones weathered again and were washed again. The patio bore these changes with indifference, and all the while Dad and Scott sat on it, North Star constants, playing games through each transformation.

Watching the game, I found it indecipherable. I gave up trying to learn the rules when I was young, around when my

sister tried and failed to learn them from our father. Dad had a bad habit of confusing Jen and me, of thinking he tried to make us both love something that he only ever shared with her. Cribbage was no different. Dad never taught me.

WHEN I REACHED MY FULL HEIGHT, PEOPLE AT the campground in Maine began mistaking my sister and me for twins. We'd outgrown our pop-up camper and had graduated to renting out the campground's one large cabin—"The Lodge" as those in the smaller cabins called it. It had a private dock complete with a rowboat, a fire pit, and a screened-in, wraparound

porch overlooking the lake. It was just downhill from the general store where I bought Bazooka bubble gum and orange and cream soda on our family's tab—my first time experiencing the sweet, tangy joy of credit. Next to the ice cream window was the

one-room arcade where we kids would play pool late into the night, and where my sister and I relished the joy of my dad thunking his way in, shaking the wooden barn floors under his heavy feet, slamming four quarters into the air hockey coin slot, and slapping a puck down onto the table for us to knock back and forth. Air hockey was a secret key to spending time with our impatient father. He loved the games because they were timed and, therefore, over with quickly. Plus, he usually won, and he could relish in that. Still, these were the first games where we could keep up with his fast pace, where we tasted the triumph of beating our competitive father, where he would curse



at us just like he would at Scott over a game of cribbage. We didn't have to learn many rules and he didn't have time to correct us; we just had to be fast, quick to react and name call, and shoot our shot. He often invented new rules when we were close to winning; if we dared to challenge him on it, he'd disappear back to horseshoes in the twilight and not allow us the dignity of a rematch.

We had to bond with Dad on his turf. He did not join our games, but rather, we had to learn to love his hobbies. Air hockey let us match Dad's natural pace and temperament, but we never exchanged deep conversations with him while playing. And when we tried to talk to him while fishing, he would shush us and tell us we were scaring off the fish. The closest we ever got to seeing Dad at ease was with our backs against the dock, watching the sky fall during the annual Perseids meteor shower. He has hearing problems



and always speaks loudly, but under the stars, he spoke in a hushed tone, afraid to startle them. For a brief interlude, Dad let his larger-than-life, storytelling persona rest and showed us his softer, sensitive side as he traced his finger along constellations and willed us to see, really see, the shapes emerge. We could be in that silence with him and not need to fill it, let it fill us instead. He grew patient and relaxed, as he was when he fished alone, and let us fish the sky for shooting stars beside him.

Still, we yearned to learn the one hobby of his we could enjoy year-round while talking with him about life.

Down the dirt road that twisted from

the arcade and curved toward the lake, our cabin sat among the pines across from a row of trailers and campsites bordering the water, and there, among those trailers, Jen made friends with a family of kids who knew cribbage. We would all sit around their picnic table in the shade watching the oldest siblings lay out cards for cribbage like a tarot reading. The oldest boy carefully taught my sister the rules. I missed the first ten minutes and was lost by the time I wandered over. She spent the afternoon playing and grinned as she got the hang of it. But when she went to my father with her newfound skills and asked to play a game, he said the rules she'd learned

were wrong. Like every other time she'd tried to learn his rules, he grew impatient and snapped at her when she made mistakes or took too long to discard cards into the crib. She and I spent the rest of that week in Maine playing through endless

afternoons of War and Egyptian Ratscrew instead of cribbage with Dad.

To be close to one another that summer was bloodsport: the sting of the air hockey puck against wrist, the slap of hands racing for a sandwiched pair of cards on the floor, the prick of a fishhook against pointer fingers. I learned everything from my sister, and when Jen gave up on learning a different way to bond with our father, I gave up with her.

I finally learned the rules of cribbage in an afternoon with my then-boyfriend's family. It was my senior year of college, and I had just accepted an outdoors job out West, and after what felt like a decade of racing, I could

finally breathe. My boyfriend's sisters, in their Easter best, explained the rules slowly, played with open hands, and told me what to discard into the crib and what to keep. I grew fond of my two pegs, delighted each time they moved forward. We played round after round, and in the final game, I clocked in over twenty points on a hand to applause, a kiss on the cheek even, and thought, *That wasn't so hard after all.*

The summer after graduation, when I bought my first cribbage board, I was living out West in a commune in Tahoe, and our conservation crew pulled the board out when camping, when waiting for dinner, when basking with warm beers on the local dog beach in South Lake. I came home in time for Labor Day at my parent's beach house triumphant, the rules finally internalized. I carried Dad's traveling board out back to the patio where he was smoking a cigarette and asked him if he wanted to play. His eyebrows raised in surprise, a short pause as he unknotted my past from my sister's, realized I'd never asked him this before, and then the delighted "Sure!" Scarlett, in the penultimate month of her life, lay on the patio between us, her eyebrows raised in excitement and tail gently wagging at our quick movements as we dealt, pegged, claimed our points. Dad told me when I missed counting a fifteen or a straight dealt out of order, and he refused to use *muggins* to claim those missed points as his own. Even with this generosity, Dad skunked me for nearly a year. But we were finally playing.



Even if I didn't learn the game from Dad, in the end, he still taught me. Taught me how to stack the crib in my favor, how to set up my opponent with a fifteen so I could lay down a double, how to trap my opponent into letting me claim straights and three-of-a-kinds. With cribbage, he had been impatient when teaching me rules, but once I could match his pace in the game, our conversation could flow. Unlike air hockey and fishing, with cribbage we would finally talk. Every visit home, after the new puppy stopped jumping on me and the crab mallets were laid down to rest, he would draw out the board Dad and Scott used to play on, or I would draw out mine, and we would cut the deck. Mom couldn't stand the game; she, like my sister, found Dad's lack of patience difficult to learn from. So she would leave us to smoke and play past midnight. Dad would ask about my writing and I would ask about his childhood and we would fall into a rhythm. All those years of unplayed games and wasted time peeled away. When we anchored the boat at the sandbar, after my mom and sister and I dragged our chairs into the waves and parked them in the sand, after we basked in the sun while Dad stayed on the boat chain-smoking and reading his book in the shade, after one or two beers when I'd go to fetch another round for Mom, I would climb aboard into the shade with him and cut the deck. We'd slap horseflies from the backs of each other's arms and lean into one another, using our bodies to shield the cards from

the wind that wanted to send them into the water. We'd rock with the waves and mumble curse words under our breath until Mom pointed out the tide was coming in and it was time to go.

OVER TIME, JEN JOINED US. SHE WAS reluctant at first. I retaught her the rules without Dad around, and I repeated myself often, gathering patience around us like a shawl. When we couldn't be together, I sent her a website where we could play one another from our phones, letting the program do the counting and pegging for her, letting it tell her if she discarded the best possible cards into the crib and how many points she could get from a hand. When she played her first games against our father, she held her own; he reminded her with practiced gentleness to count her Jacks right when she got nibs. Eventually, I studied games on the porch became casual games on the boat. Easy. Fun. The two of them would even play without me as I entertained Mom on the beach. Jen still grows irritated when Dad corrects her counting—"Always count your fifteens first!", but I think she likes it too. Because they are playing. You can only resent the ump with love and affection once you are playing.



Once I read that most women's relationships with fathers in their twenties are thin attempts to make up for the distance the father created when the women were teenagers. I read that just around Labor Day three years after Dad and I started playing cribbage together. That

holiday weekend, I arrived at the beach and my father gave me a quick hug before driving off to check the lines on the boat; he didn't return for over an hour. By then I'd grown sleepy by the campfire and could overhear Mom and Jen whispering their anger, trying not to upset me. We all knew he'd put off visiting his friends that day, and it was only my arrival that reminded him he'd waited too long, that he had to make moves to do everything he wanted to in the day. When he finally came home ready for a game of cribbage, I felt all the years of him treating his friends' games as more important than mine bubble up, and I howled at him as I had as a teenager, seeing his selfishness on display for the first time. I repeated, again and again, "I am trying to spend more time with you." I told him that in the six visits home I make each year, I will demand his undivided attention. I will try to close the distance that engulfed us for a decade.

I've given up the search for my board. It will appear when I most need it. For now, I cannot go home, cannot stay up late on the porch at the beach house, cannot drive the boat to the sandbar. For now, my father and I send one another codes to face off in cribbage matches on our phones. A signal weakened by the bay that borders Dad's house doesn't matter. We call each week and let the program on our phones do the counting and pegging for us, so long as we can curse one another, smell a skunk coming, taunt and tease. Cut, deal, peg, crib. Cut, deal, peg, crib. We've found our rhythm in this too. ♦