image info

card games

PAT DUTT

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My journey starts as we drive to the Buffalo airport through a raging, lake-effect snowstorm. Tom's rusted van rocks and rolls, sometimes bumper-to-bumper with other decrepit vehicles through central New York's small hamlets, passing overloaded trucks that teeter dangerously as they skirt the curves. He maintains a safe enough distance from the ancient, corroded pickups that threaten to die and block the road, but when we get stuck behind a snowplow, Tom, sensing my anxiety, says: "Relax, Wendy. Read your book. We have time. Your mom is not going anywhere." But time is what I don't have.

The first sight of palm trees and blood-red rhododendrons always makes my heart beat fast, and even from the air-conditioned bullet train that conveys me to the Orlando airport exit, I can feel that sweltering Floridian sun on my bare skin. In the old days, there was a meet-and-greet; now the doors that open belong to the ad-wrapped Cocoa Beach shuttle. As the shuttle rolls to its designated spot, I climb in front while a gaggle of stocky Minnesotans take ownership of the middle and back. They laugh like wild, hormonal-driven adolescents on a schoolbus. Flashes from their cells shoot off like fireworks as they document every motion and emotion, all the while conversing at the higher end of the decibel scale. One says: "Did you bring the cards?" Reply, "Are you kidding me? The cruises have cards! They have rooms of just cards!" Laughter, giggles, guffaws. "Poker is my game," another says. Response, "No way baby: Canasta is the rasta!" They joke and jostle, then complete each other's sentences as if their minds were connected by high-speed data cables. Their generous goodwill portends the momentous, like the surprising way red clover can fill a field in spring, after a long, cold winter.

Two hours later I emerge from the shuttle and climb the outside stucco stairway of my mom's five-story building, and as I do, the moon, full and bright over the Atlantic Ocean, follows me. She did well, my mom. Growing up during the Depression, dinners were potato soup and sausages split six ways. Fruit wasn't always available, and rotary phones were only for the rich.

Not wanting to wake her, I let myself in, and after a quick perusal of the refrigerator (stale sandwiches with squishy lettuce, batteries in the veggie crisper), I cocoon myself in the extra bedroom. Then I wonder: what will we talk about for the next six days?

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The next morning my mom downs a long sequence of meds, then toasts a stale bagel, asking if I'd like one. I decline and convince her to open the hurricane blinds so we can see the Atlantic. The Atlantic Ocean at her beck-and-call doesn't seem to mean much to her now, but it did when she and my dad first moved south thirty years ago. When I mention Dad, she shakes her head, so we drink coffee and let the TV do our talking. Honestly, we don't talk much at all, the rule being to avoid controversial topics. In many ways we are opposites: she gets joy from her knickknacks and bobbing with her noodle in the outdoor pool, and I get mine from hiking and reading. In fact, my walking route is already mapped out, and I've read half of *The Art of Listening*. "Listen without assumptions," the author says. "And carefully, without judgment, because everyone wants to tell their story, and most of all, everyone wants to be understood."

"I know how much you like books," my mom says, handing me a dogeared-paperback, *Hoyts Rules for Card Games*. "But I can never figure out what books you don't have, so I thought for sure, you don't have this one."

"Damn straight, Mom."

"Put it in your backpack. You should do it now, that way you won't leave it here."

Same old bossy mom, but with reduced animation and the slight hunch to her back. My three brothers and I called her The Dictator because she was always on everyone's case, my dad's in particular. "When are you going to fix that washing machine?" she'd say, her voice unkind. Or, "I told you that paint had too much red in it!" Then to my youngest brother, "Turn off that TV and don't talk back to me." Middle brother, "You need to shower and cut that ratty hair of yours." The eldest, "That girl is no good for you." Recently her energies have been devoted to Jesus. "I'm ready to see Jesus," she's told me repeatedly, along with her deceased sister and mother, but not my dad, who died fifteen years ago.

After his service, later that night in the outdoor jacuzzi, my brothers and I drank expensive champagne. We reconnected after many years. They thought I was foolish for living in New York State with its high taxes and lousy weather, so they gave me a short course on business and benefits of living in the south, where the people ruled, not the government. I described working as a science teacher in a dirt-poor neighborhood and bringing up three kids alone. "You're a bleeding-heart hippie, Wendy," they said. "You live in a make-believe backwater town, and have no idea how the real world functions. If it weren't for those of us who go to work every single damn day, the poor would have nothing. Absolutely nothing." We argued about who made the rules. Who the rules were for, and why. Then always there was this looming question: why were women denied the rights to their bodies, yet men had all the rights to their bodies? It made them angry to hear this, these men who would never get pregnant. After that I was no longer part of the tribe. Every conversation turned into an argument that fostered resentment. Along with their wives, they stopped returning my phone calls and left my texts unanswered. It took me years to understand resentment and its close cousin, unreasonable resentment, and years to accept that if someone doesn't want a relationship with you, there's not much you can do about it.

My mom is my only living relative who will talk to me, but she prefers to talk to Jesus. It's as if Jesus joins us every night as she heats her frozen dinner and I cook my beans and rice. Not only that, but she feels obligated to ensure that her brood is saved. My brothers and their families, having renounced the public sector, are strong supporters of religion, but I am another story altogether and always have been. So when my mom asks if I believe in Jesus, if I say: "I don't believe," she will persist with what she contends are good arguments, and if I say, "I do believe," then I have lied to my own mother. So I try to change the conversation over to me: the night I was born, regular born, not born-again.

"It was a birth," she says. "Not complicated." When I press her for details, she says, "It's private." Anything that she doesn't want to talk about—it's private. It must be a generational thing. The #MeToo movement would appall her, the concept as foreign to her as bridge is to me.

My mother never misses bridge.

"I'm here all day, Wendy. Maybe I'll walk down to the pool and see who's there."

Hobble is more like it, yet my mother elaborates: the day is neither a medical day—doctor, lab, hospital—and at this time of her life, she has many medical days and misses many, having been officially identified as a non-compliant patient. Nor is it a bridge day. I read my book on listening, and when she returns from the pool, I channel-surf in the Granny Cave as she plays Spider and Two-Deck Solitaire. For most of the day, my mother sits at her computer, getting up only to steal frosted cookies.

"You don't want to play?" she asks me.

"Not really, Mom." If she's disappointed, it lasts only a second. She sits on her chair, back suddenly erect, infatuated with those cards as if they held a deeper meaning about life. We grew up with cards. The spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs were our vocabulary words. You take away the card games, and my mom ceases to exist.

"Don't you remember when you were kids, how you all used to play Hearts?"

"Of course! All the neighborhood kids would come over. We'd sit at the dining room table because the kitchen table wasn't big enough, and we'd drink Kool-Aid. This was before Jim Jones gave Kool-Aid a bad name."

"Times have changed," my mom says.

"You would pop popcorn and we'd drench it with butter and salt. How could I forget?"

"Your brothers would get so mad when you shot the moon."

"That's because I remember the cards. They didn't take the game to that level. They didn't have to."

In the summer we'd play outside every night until dark: kickball, tag, freeze-tag, dodge ball, softball, all the tags and balls that we could think of. And we'd skateboard. A skateboard back then was a flat piece of wood on four tiny steel wheels that often froze up.

The adults would occupy the living room. They'd set up card tables and chairs, drink rum-and-Cokes and smoke. We'd sneak some Coke—meaning, of course, Coca-Cola. Grab some chips, listen to the adult talk, the trilling laughter, the sharp clink of bottles and glasses. And when the games ended, and my parents had cleaned the ashtrays and loaded the dishwasher, something would pass between them. I did not know what it was, and I never took the time to think about what it might have been.

I suggest taking a walk along the beach—it's right there! Or eating lunch at Sea Breeze, just up the road. Check out a bookstore, a movie, but my mom's legs hurt. Anyway, all of her physical and intellectual energy is devoted to Spider.

"I'm playing bridge tomorrow. Why don't you come?"

"I'll think about it." But I can't imagine being trapped inside in a VA room with elevator music and war stories about hip replacements and near-misses on A1A. And I have no desire to glorify anything even remotely related to a king.

"It's only for a few hours."

"Mom, I'm going to do some yoga now."

"Oh," she says. "Or should I say Ommmm?"

For the next few days, I take long walks along the beach and when I walk north, NASA's launch pads fill my view. I eat my beans and rice, my mom eats her stale bagels and frozen dinners. Sometimes I wonder why I came here. I imagined this book on listening—highly recommended—would be the key to forming a connection, but it's no help. "Be non-judgmental," it says. "Look for opportunities." Right. And then my last full day comes, and it is not what I anticipated.

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This is the one activity I swore I'd never participate in, but my mom's driving skills are borderline safe on an ideal day, and today the winds are brutal. Bad weather and I are the closest of companions. We're like strawberries and cheesecake: one without the other is only half the experience. The bridge player who usually drives my mom has a cold, and at ninety-four, a cold can be a deal-breaker. I drive us to bridge.

The beige-carpeted room has a dozen or so card tables, surrounded by cushioned foldup chairs. The room begins to fill up as the participants hobble, shuffle, and wheelchair in. They angle, adapt, adjust, and do whatever they can to get close to their table. They come with the accouterments of oxygen tanks, eyeglasses, and

clam-shell croissants leaking tuna fish. I have my own accouterments: a backpack filled with books, a charged computer, and enough podcasts to keep me entertained until I retire. As I seat myself alongside a far wall and plug in my earbuds, I watch a card player summon my mom. I'm deep into *Call Your Therapist: What is Unreasonable Resentment?* when my mom approaches me.

"Wendy," she says in a way that indicates a position of vulnerability. Not her style at all. "My partner just called and she can't make it today." She scans the room and I follow: everyone is paired up like dates at the Junior Prom.

"I don't know how to play bridge, Mom." I pop out one earbud. "I have no idea. Zero. Zilch!"

"It's not as though you don't know what a suit is." Her face starts to harden into The Dictator of my childhood, the do-it-my-way, and I instinctively resurrect the anger she directed at my dad, a meek and gentle man. Then uncharacteristically, her face softens.

"We have time," she says.

"Time?" I feel prickles of sweat along my hairline and glance at the empty foldup chair beckoning me. The chair looks incomplete in this busy room, and lonely, but it's my mom's defeated stare that I feel in the pit of my stomach. Our relationship, which has never been stellar, has aged over time but it hasn't changed much in all the decades we've spent together, and here I am: literally in the driver's seat.

"How much time?" I say. I waffle back and forth, noting the pensive faces of the other two women, waiting.

"Ten minutes," one says.

"I have paper and a pencil," the other says.

The women squint and purse their lips as they size me up: am I a teachable fifty-something?

I join my mom, Charette, and Florence at the table. Back in the day when my parents used to play in the living room, the bonhomie centered around cigarettes and rum-and-cokes; now there are too many oxygen tanks for cigs, and rum at 1:00 pm would send the room into overdrive and cavernous ZZs. Pencil in hand, I scribe away as they give me the rundown: the four suits and hierarchy, the thirteen tricks, and high cards. Honor cards and their worth.

"You bid depending on how many honor cards—Jacks, Queens, Kings, Aces—you have in your hand," Flo says. She tells me to call her Flo. She reviews the assigned values. "Then your partner can pass or bid."

"Charette," I start . . .

"Char," she says.

"What is it with the monarchy?" I say. "This alchemical symbolization? Look at their faces! Sour pusses! And why, tell me, is the Queen always worth less than a King?" I pause and listen, then that Minnesotan laughter from the shuttle bus starts rattling around in my brain, and something starts to dislodge, the feeling similar to the release of a challenging yoga pose, but what begins—I don't have a name for it.

"The story of my life, honey," Flo says.

"Ditto," Char says, "what they don't know."

"When I bid," my mom says sternly, guiding me back to the game, "I'm telling my partner, who sits across from me, what I have. Similarly, with her bid. It's all about communication."

I am stunned; I have never heard my mother use that word—communication. Drill sergeants order and command, they never say communication. I feel—and I can't explain this—some sense of myself physically connected to my mom, just by sitting next to her.

"What we have here is a failure to communicate," Flo says.

"*Cool Hand Luke*," I say.

"Very good," Flo says.

"Focus," my mom says. "You look your partner in the eye, and that's more information revealed to her."

"I didn't realize the game was this complicated," I say.

"We're just getting started, honey," Char says, patting my hand, as if to calm me and impart wisdom. "We do a lot of talking in bridge. But you need to pay attention." Char sits in her wheel chair, shuffling the cards like a seasoned casino gambler.

They describe the rules of playing in the same suit, and what trump means.

"Trump! I thought we weren't supposed to mention him!" I say to my newfound friends.

The women go heh-heh-heh and then tell me to focus, again, because we're starting in five minutes, and I barely know anything about the game. That they're just scratching the surface.

Every table is given score pads and two pencils, and when the clock hands—a real clock above the door, with two real hands—hits the 1 (the minute hand) and the 12 (the second hand), the room comes alive. The players shuffle and deal with a Vegas flair; cards slap and slide, and like bookies, the bids fill the room and soar with the power of an incantation. From every coven of four, the cards fly, reminding me of insects suddenly shedding cocoons and exploding into life. Amazingly, my mom remembers every card played, and instructs me to do the same.

"That's a lot to remember," I say under my breath.

"Just do your Om chant and you'll be fine," my mom says, not even looking at me.

We take a trick. Then another. I keep my eyes on her eyes. At the end of the first round, when all thirteen tricks have been played, the person to the left shuffles, and one of them tells a story with a punch line. Char's is about camping in Yellowstone Park forty-five years ago. One of her kids had confessed to hiding candy bars in his pillow, a no-no given that the bears roamed free. As Char heard the garbage can rattling getting closer and closer to their tent, she grabbed the pillow and threw it outside as far as she could.

"We didn't want to wake up dead," she said.

"Good thinking," my mom says.

"In the morning all we found was a shredded pillow and some candy wrappers."

"Close call," my mom says as she shuffles.

Then when it's Flo's turn, and she describes how her youngest was always a clown, but a brilliant and entertaining clown, and all through grade school, she would get phone calls from the nuns complaining about how he disrupted every single class he was in. "And I would say, 'Look here: you're in charge. You take care of it. Why do you think I'm sending him to the Catholic school? If he needs discipline, give it to him.'"

"The nuns could have been a little more chill," my mom says.

Where'd that word come from?

"The research says now that it's not good to keep children in their seats for such long, extended periods of time," Char says.

Everyone nods, and I start to get the hang of the game, and then we move to another table, and low and behold, my mom and I don't come in last, and not first, but we have a respectable showing. High fives.

As we're walking out the door, Flo says to me, "My kids never would have come here. Not in a million years, not with all of their important jobs and friends. Activities like yoga."

"They just don't know what they're missing!" I say.

"What is it with this yoga?" Flo looks at me over the rim of her glasses.

"It puts you in the present," I say, glancing at my mom. "As opposed to the past. In the here and now. Yoga can be simple, as simple as becoming aware of your breath."

"Could have fooled me," Char says. "The young people today. Always on their cells. They don't like to talk to one another. They don't seem to want to be in the here and now."

"They have a distaste for the face-to-face," Flo says, rolling her eyes.

"Because taking in the entire human," Char says, "can be scary. With another person right there, you have to respond. Sometimes I think it's too much for their young, fragile nervous systems."

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As I'm driving home, my mom, out of nowhere says, "You were born during a snowstorm."

"It figures," I say. "This connection between me and bad weather started before I even took my first breath."

"And back then, in the hills outside Buffalo, no one drove during a snowstorm. Especially where we lived. Deep ditches, no street lights. When it snowed, the roads, which were already narrow, sometimes disappeared. Definitely during a storm, you couldn't see any difference between the corn fields and the asphalt. I'd had beans for dinner, and I

couldn't stop vomiting. Your dad was at the steel plant. He was the coke ovens manager and usually the only engineer on call. But no one could find him, so I called your Uncle John. He took me to the hospital. I didn't think we were going to make it."

"So Dad wasn't there when I was born?"

"He was with someone else."

And in that unpredictable way that memories return, I recall the random phone calls that came to the house at night, the stricken look on my mom's face, and her threats.

"I'm sorry, Mom. That wasn't right of him to behave like that. That must have been really hurtful to you."

She sighs. I don't think anyone had ever said that to her.

We ride in silence back to the condo along wide, easily navigable streets that are lit up by hotels and restaurants. It starts to make more sense, the periods of silence between my parents, my mom's perpetual anger. Believing her treatment of him was unfair, that the difficult marriage was my mom's doing, we always took our dad's side. There were rumors of infidelity right up until his death, but who wants to believe her parents are less than royalty? I could not understand my mom's harsh attitude as he lay dying, sick with cancer. I did not talk to her for years, and that now seems like an unreasonable resentment.

That night my mom eats her frozen dinner and watches Fox News. I eat my salad, call Tom, text my kids, and I'm sitting at the dining room table reading when my mom appears with a deck of cards. We start playing bridge, and it's a little more difficult with just two players, but we figure it out, and as we do, my mom tells me about her childhood, how her mother got pregnant at age sixteen—not so uncommon as you'd think in the

1920s—and how her father started a business, but he drank a lot, and how her mother—who never got along well with my mother—would command her to walk over to the corner bar and drag her dad home, and how he would buy her a soda—a luxury during the Depression—so that he could stay longer and have another beer. That's how she got her charm, and learned how a business worked. "He was probably an alcoholic," she said. "But never a mean alcoholic. He died young. He was only fifty-nine." My uncles attended college and worked for the family business thereby securing most of the company's stock. Because she was a woman, my mom wasn't given such opportunities, so she started investing on her own in the early sixties, having learned from those evenings spent with her father. It was a game, and my mother loved games, and that game made college possible for us, and it bought her this spectacular condo, three hundred feet from the Atlantic Ocean.

My mom made damn sure that I went to college.

It's getting late, and I'm tired—I fly back to the tundra tomorrow—no hurricanes or snowstorms predicted, and my mom says, "Make yourself some tea, Wendy. I don't have a lot of time left." So I do, and the cards start flying, and my mom tells me more about her life and who she really is.