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### Cards with My Family

How many things have you been doing your whole life? Playing guitar? Going to ballet, soccer, baseball? Painting, speaking French, driving a stick, riding bikes? Playing cards?

When posed that question, I realized that other than playing cards, nothing else has been a part of my life from as far back as my dimmest childhood memory, up to today. And, I freely confess that I'm a disastrous card player. Never volunteer to be my partner. I can't keep track of who has run out of diamonds, or how many trump are left. That would require me to subtract something from thirteen, and I refuse to mix work, play, and beer.

Grandma and Grandpa introduced me to cards when I was itty-bitty. It was the 1960's, and Mom and Dad would go out for dinner and dancing every Saturday night. Grandma and Grandpa would watch Lawrence Welk, and I would hop around and dance to JoAnn, the player piano player. Then, after the cast sang "Good night (deedle-ee-deet), sleep tight (deedle-ee-deet), and happy dre-e-e-ams to you..." it was time for cards.

I used to play all kinds of games from the old country with Grandma and Grandpa—Pinochle and some game that they changed the name of, so my little kindergarten-mouth could pronounce it. I was such a good card player back then. I used to win every game.

With my sister, I would play Double Solitaire, Go Fish, and Gin. She taught me how to shuffle cards like a waterfall. To this day, I feel cool when I shuffle cards the way she taught me, which is kind of lame, if you think about it. We used to play on Sunday mornings, while

Mom was making lunch. Card-playing is the only childhood memory I have of my sister. She was 9 years older than me, had her cool high school life, and thought I was pretty boring. But, on those Sunday mornings as the beef stewed, or the chicken fried, we sistered.

The best memory I have is the smell of alcohol, stale smoke and perfume, when it was Mom and Dad's turn to host The Poker Party. It happened twice a year—my favorite holiday—when Bernie and Jean, and Dorothy and Elmer would come over for a night of penny-ante dealer's-choice poker. They would play cards and chatter, laugh like hyenas and drink until midnight. The cackling laughter, the rhythmic jingle of nickels and dimes, and my Dad's cries of "Oh, you dirty dog," was a sweet lullaby to my ears, as I drifted off to a deep... and dreamless... sleep.

Time passed. My sister got married and moved away. I quit playing cards with my grandparents, because I grew up and didn't need to be babysat anymore. I had my cool high school life. I don't remember the last game I played with them. I wish it had been momentous, or that I had even noticed. And then, I moved away. Once we had scattered all over America, the only time the family got together was for the major holidays. Grandma and Grandpa were gone, but we had two new players—my nephews.

So, why would two cool guys with their cool college lives stick around and play cards with their mother, father, aunt, and grandparents? Giggle fits. Giggle fits start when one sister says something really stupid, then laughs at her own stupid statement. The other sister starts to laugh. Mom and Dad then laugh at the original stupid statement, laugh at the sister laughing at her own joke, and laugh at the other sister laughing. The nephews, strategizing over their cards look up, see the laughing and start laughing. They don't know why. Laughing escalates into guffawing, tears, facial contortion, gasping for breath, turning purple, laying helpless on the table

and the inevitable stress urinary incontinence for the ladies. My brother-in-law looks at us, mystified. He doesn't get the joke. There was no joke.

In recent years, we started playing simpler games that didn't require much concentration or skill. Mom had Parkinson's, and the last year or so before she died, she would get confused if the rules were too complicated. Dad, or one of us across the table, would try to help her decide which card she should play. The Christmas after Mom died, Dad started getting that way too. Then, lots of little strokes left him unable to speak. He went into the nursing home, where he charmed all the nurses with his pretty blue eyes.

This was the first Thanksgiving that we played without Dad. One of my nephews brought a girl that I just can't warm up to. My other nephew couldn't stop texting some girl in Venezuela and all I really wanted to do was read that trashy Swedish novel that's all the rage.

Astronomers say that the fate of our universe will be to expand forever until everything is so far apart that even the atoms lose their cohesion, and that eventually everything that ever was, will wink out. Were the cards our glue over all these years, or Mom and Dad? Now that they're gone, will we all just drift apart?

Thinking back over the many years, I'm beginning to see that playing cards wasn't our glue, it was our mirror. Playing reflected loving parents and grandparents, brothers, sisters and dear friends who loved being together. Today, playing is reflecting a family being pulled in a thousand directions—every direction but together. But, I have to believe that love doesn't go away because times become complicated. Sometimes, love requires effort. This Thanksgiving, I'm going to hide everyone's cell phones and unhook the cable. I'm going to put on some cheesy old music, and ask everyone to humor me and play cards like we did when all that mattered was being together, and laughing and talking about nothing. Maybe it will catch on.

