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### Deck the Halls

On Christmas Day 2000, two days before I turned six, my grandparents gave me a deck of playing cards. I spent that evening as I had many other Christmas evenings: sitting on the floor around the dining room table, watching my family play Pounce. But this year, I had my own cards to discover. Pounce is as much a ritual as it is a game in my family. For as long as I can remember, the rules of the game have been explained to everyone who encounters it in the same way: "It's solitaire, but you play on each other's aces. First one out of cards wins the round. You play to one hundred...but if Poppie's playing, we let him win if he gets to negative one hundred." I'll clarify.

Every player has their own deck of cards and sets up a game of solitaire with the addition of a stack of thirteen cards on the left-hand side. The top card in this stack can be played in the same way as any card you flip over in your hand can be played: one at a time, on your aces or on your personal stacks. The goal of the game is two-part. First, the first person that runs out his or her stack of thirteen "wins" the round and everyone must stop playing when this person goes "out." However, because of the way the scoring is done, the first person to go "out" doesn't necessarily get the most points for that round. Scoring happens as follows: you count the number of cards left in your stack of thirteen after the first person goes out. You double this number. And then you subtract that number from the total number of cards you played "in the middle" aka on any ace. This is where the second goal of the game comes into play. You want to play as many cards in the middle as possible. For example, if only one ace of hearts is played in the middle, but three people have the three of hearts, you have to continue flipping through your own deck and playing your own game, contemplating other moves while also watching for someone to

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play the two of hearts and praying you'll notice it quicker and move your hand faster than the other two people who also need to play their card. It's a game of skill, speed, and luck.

And as you can see, it's not simple. As a kid, just remembering the rules was hard enough let alone getting anywhere close to decent at the game. How do you simultaneously look at the middle of the table, your stacks, and your hand? How do you reach across the table to an ace two arm lengths away from you? And what does "Shit!" mean? And why does everybody keep shouting it? Like many a kid asking the "shit" question, I was never given answers. This was the due to the last rule of the game. If you want to play, no matter your age, you are met with the same warning: "You can play, but you're on your own."

This survival-of-the-fittest technique is solely reserved for the game and comes out of the mouths of the people who, to this day, still ask me if I need help with my homework. But in the world of Pounce, this rule is steadfast. You come into the game on your own terms. You don't get help. You will lose. But you will learn. All the grandchildren were given playing cards that year. I was given Scooby Doo-themed cards, my little sister, Kate, was given cards covered in colorful Goofy scenes, and my twin cousins were given Snoopy-themed cards, Kendall's deck mostly blue and Tyler's mostly yellow. Not yet ready to stand at the table, we sat on the floor around the outside watching our family's nimble fingers shuffle cards at the speed of light. We studied their movements and tried to figure out just how they did it like trying to work out a magic trick. The sound of 52 edges ricocheting off one another then neatly folding together was our only focus. The sound of a perfect bridge shuffle.

The sound was comforting yet thrilling. It was a sound we chased. Our young hands struggled to reach around the decks in our desperate efforts to reproduce such a noise and gain the confidence to walk up to that table covered in plastic to protect it from the scratches and

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scuffing of grown adults throwing themselves across it. But that night, while Kate delighted in a self-induced game of 52 pick up, the twins and I fixated on each other's finger placement and shared our strategies. I think one of the twins got the shuffle that year, but none of us got up the courage to carry our deck to the table. Nonetheless, the years passed, and one by one each of us rose from the floor. The game was tough at first and required at least second-grade math skills, but eventually, we each found our rhythm in the tempo of flipping cards.

According to *How It's Made*, playing cards start out as giant stacks of yard-long white cardstock stuck together with colored glue to ensure opaqueness. These stacks are kept in a humidified and temperature controlled warehouse to prevent warping and drying out prior to printing. Once a printing plate is made, thick red, blue, yellow, and black inks are prepared and the sheets of cardstock are fed into a printing press where the ink makes its way onto the cards through a rubber stamp-like instrument. The sheets do this all over again for the back design and are quickly cut by rotating blades and a die to produce the little rounded rectangles we recognize as a deck of cards. The deck is then wrapped tightly in heat-sealed cellophane and sent off to be slapped onto kitchen tables and fill Christmas stockings.

The deck of 52 cards made up of 4 suits is what we in America recognize today as a standard deck of cards, but they have not always looked like this. In Edward Samuel Taylor's 1865 book regarding the history of card games, he attributes the creation of cards to Asia and credits the "Gipsies" for bringing tarot cards of various sizes, suits, and purposes to Europe at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, cards have migrated to every region imaginable, but this 52-card deck of diamonds, hearts, clubs, and spades marks its origins in France. The deck of tarot cards was slowly reduced to four suits of the same shape and color we use today but were named differently. The face cards of each suit have been named and renamed multiple times over the

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years; for example, while the Queen of Hearts was once Judith, Diamonds was Rachel, Clubs was Argine, and Spades was Pallas, they transformed to become symbols of wisdom, birth, beauty, and fortitude; a naming that seems to harken back to their tarot roots.

In writing and poetry, cards are used almost exclusively as a metaphor for life. Proverbs like “play the hand you are dealt” have been reworked so often that dealt cards have become a dying metaphor for the unpredictability of life. This may be due in part to cards’ historically close relationship with fortune telling through tarot. Though it is argued that a greater force controls the randomness of tarot cards, this force lies outside of one’s own control and leaves the subject in no more control than in a game of chance.

Like in life, the possibilities that exist in a deck of cards are seemingly endless. Statistics tell us that it’s likely that no deck of cards has ever been shuffled into the same order. The odds of it happening are 1 out of every 52!. That computes to 1 out of every 80,658,175,170,943,878,571,660,636,856,403,766,975,289,505,440,883,277,824,000,000,000,000 shuffles. The world has been shuffling cards for hundreds of years, but has not yet reached this number of shuffles. Not even close. It is estimated that 108 billion people have ever been born on planet earth. If we generously assume that every person ever born lived to the age of eighty, and if each of those people shuffled cards every moment of their lives and completed one shuffle a second, that only computes to 240,710,400,000,000,000,000 shuffles. No grains of sand on the planet, drops of water in the ocean, or atoms on Earth metaphor can begin to compare to the number of possible permutations of a deck of cards.

My great Aunt Sandra was one of those rare permutations of a human being. She was also the uncontested queen of pounce and probably the instigator of the “throw yourself to the wolves” rule. It was a pretty much a fact that she could not be beat, undoubtedly due to the fact

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that she approached pounce like she did everything else in her life. This is a woman who made her own fate. At the age of 79 she swam competitively and hiked constantly. She played tennis on a weekly basis and was helping raise her grandchild. And I don't mean that she did these things in the senior-citizen weekend "tournaments" kind of way. I mean it in the sense that I'm pretty sure that even when I was spending hours upon hours a week doing gymnastics and dancing competitively, she could beat my mile time. She didn't live gently, and she didn't love gently. It made her invincible.

I remember the Christmas my mom beat her. No one saw it coming, but with my mom's oddly calm and defiantly confident statement of "out" all our eyes went wide. As the numbers were confirmed, our stunned expressions quickly transformed into a fit of laughter at my aunt's outcry of betrayal and shock and a frown that was quickly given away by the twinkle in her eye. A hint of the pride she felt for her niece peaked through as my mother, after forty plus years of endless shuffles and losses beat her. It felt less like a dethroning and more like a compulsory abdication that preserved matriarchal rule. A fight well won. I'm not sure if it was out of motherly pride or playful sister rivalry that my grandma had the scorecard from that game framed, probably a bit of both, but to this day, that scrap of paper sits proudly on the top of our piano amongst photo after photo of family gatherings. And when Aunt Sandra died of a stroke just a few years later, still as much a force as ever, it was the first memory I recalled.

It is a fact of life that the more times you shuffle a new deck of cards, the more inclined the deck is to work with you. The cards slowly become accustomed to the bend and the originally slippery surface becomes tackier with time. In a game of Pounce, having a perfectly worn-in, sticks-to-your-thumb deck of cards is vital. It is a game reliant on speed, and every Christmas, you can find all of us grandchildren quarrelling over the cards with the most history.

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Last Christmas as our parents and grandparents slept, Kate, Tyler, Kendall, and I stayed up laughing and whisper yelling “There’s no ‘sorry’ in Pounce!” at each other over a cloth-covered kitchen table as we expertly bridged worn cards adorned with cartoon dogs between our fingers. The only sound that couldn’t be muffled was the rhythmic slapping of the four decks being bridge-shuffled like a habit.

Every once in a while, a parent or grandparent would sneak into the dining room. They might ask who was winning and be met with one beaming grin and three groans of “She got lucky.” Or they might ask “When do you guys plan to go to bed?” in the way that only a parent can turn a question into a statement. But they never followed through on this demand. Each adult would walk through, make him or herself a cup of tea or get some water, take a seat a few paces away from the table, and sit, just for a minute, to watch the cards they’d been dealt play a game of Pounce.