

A New Hand

Playing cards is one of the most personable things I know. Even when the other person is relative stranger, within a short amount of time, they can feel like a friend you have known a life time. My grandfather loved the game. Not playing the cards itself, but the game of seeing just how quickly you could make the other person smile, laugh, or even crack their own joke. Late into the night, I used to hear his rip-roaring laughter as he played cards with guests, old friends, or sometimes family. That is why, when my grandfather died, my first thought was no more rip-roaring laughter, no more cards. No more. Instead, a rushing river crashed, around my ears, drowning everything out. After those first words, I heard nothing else.

We buried him on a Monday. I shouldn't have made it through the funeral without crying. But I did. I watched my family around me, my stomach dropping at their red eyes and wet cheeks. But I couldn't feel the same pain they felt. It was like I had flipped a switch, like the last kitchen light grandpa would turn off before going to bed. That is why I went back to school the next day.

My mom got a call about me from the office at school on Thursday. Although they were informed of the *circumstances*, there was a certain level of *decency* to maintain, and throwing a chair was, frankly, *disruptive*. My principle called my mother in, giving her a pamphlet.

“I.Y. O.C., Indigenous Youth Outreach Centre” he had said. “There is a therapist there she can talk to. It ought to help until she is welcome back”

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It was Friday. My mom dropped me off at the centre. I plodded up the front steps, and leaned inside the place. Empty. Behind the desk was a table with a stack of board games. A deck of cards. Five other doors lined the walls. Unnerved by the silence, I hit the bell sitting on its counter. Out of the kitchen burst a large, tall lady, who bustled about with the air of a grandma who had just found out you hadn't been fed. She looked young, the hint of a grin lingering on her face.

"Mary?" She asked, her sparkling eyes questioning. "Sorry, I was in the kitchen." I stared at her, bewildered. She leaned back her head and laughed. "You're probably wondering how I know your name. Your mom called ahead last night." She glanced down at her extending hand. "My name is Rhonda." I took it and shook. "We actually filled out your forms last night over the phone, so there is no business we need to take care of first" she said, slipping behind her desk and shuffling some papers. "So, let me give you the grand tour of the place", gesturing around the room. "Those two are the bathrooms. That one I just came out of is the kitchen. This one right here is the room for watching DVDs, or maybe I'll send ya there if your music is too loud" she said, winking. "And the last one is a room you can go to if you want to talk to someone..." I cut her off.

"Listen" I said. "My mom just wants me to come here. I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't need to." Putting her hands up she bowed her head in agreement.

"You don't have to tell me, kid" she started. "Everything around here, you do at your own pace. One last thing" she said, nodding over her shoulder. "I suggest you talk Ian. The kid over there". I looked past her. Sitting on a beanbag chair in the corner, sat a small, scrawny kid, probably around twelve or thirteen. I nodded. "Maybe play a game" she suggested, before turning back to her work.

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I sat at the table. The skinny boy sat across from me. "I'm Ian" he said. His ears stuck out too much.

"Mary" I grunted back. "So... you wanna play a game...?" I asked tentatively. He seemed shy around a much older girl. Smiling timidly in agreement, he reached out for the pack of cards. "How 'bout scrabble?" I interjected quickly. His hand quickly darted a new path and picked up the box. That afternoon was quiet. All we heard was the clicking of scrabble tiles, and the rain that started back up and pattered upon the roof. Rhonda scribbled at her paper work, and I became lost in the game. It was a nice break. "Bye!" he had called out that night, as I was leaving. I waved back at him.

At home, my mother questioned me. "What did you today?" She called out as I climbed to my room.

"Nothing." I replied.

"Did you meet anyone new?"

"No". I said, and went to bed.

The next day was Saturday. My mother insisted on driving me again. I saw that Ian had gotten there before I had, again. He was already seated at the table, slowly building up a tower of Jenga. 'My least favourite' I thought, but I sat down anyway.

"So, what school do you go too?" He tentatively asked.

"I'm not so sure at the moment." I responded. He seemed mildly impressed, and frightened, by this answer.

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“Oh, well I go to...” I didn’t hear him as my mind began to wander, Ian kept rattling on. Then he said something that yanked me back.

“Sorry, what was that?” I interrupted.

“Oh I was just saying, I kinda felt like you when they first sent me here. I was upset over her dying, but Rhonda’s been real nice and she’s helped out a lot.”

“Oh..,” I faltered.

“Yeah but I’ve been coming here a while, and its my favourite thing to do here, play the games. Some of the other kids that come and go they like the movies, and the boombox. Not me. Rhonda says I could sit here all day.” He said proudly. I smiled at him. “Its your turn”, he said, placing his brick on the top. Carefully, I pulled out my piece, and as carefully as I could, set it on the top. The whole tower came crashing down. “Shoot!” I yelled, jumping up. Just as I was about to swipe all the pieces onto the floor, Ian reached out and stopped me.

“Its okay” he said. “When it breaks... you can just rebuild it.” He was right.

It was Sunday, and I sat around the house. “No homework at least” I thought. I didn’t want to admit that after two days, I was kinda getting used to that place.

Monday began much better. Or maybe it was my mood. I showed up, slightly earlier than usual, the sweet smell of baking bread permeating the air. “You want some hun?” Rhonda asked, knowingly. I nodded my head vigorously. She beckoned me into the kitchen, I grabbed plates. Doling out generous helpings of the warm bannock, she

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asked, “now you’ve been here a couple of days, what d’you think?”. I gazed around the small kitchen, it felt warm and cozy.

“I don’t know” I shrugged. “It’s pretty good I guess. I don’t mind the food, or the games...Or the people” I added shyly.” She smiled, satisfied. We walked out, plates in hand. Ian was smiling, holding up Monopoly.

“Who’s in?” He grinned, looking between Rhonda and me. Sitting around the table, we had three players. Looking from one to the other, realization dawning on me, I turned. “Rhonda” I asked. “How come I never seen any of those therapists the pamphlet was talking about? Is he always in that room?”. Both she and Ian laughed.

“Oh hun you’re looking at him!” Then laughed once again when I stared incredulously at Ian. “No, not Ian... Me!” She continued to chuckle.

“You?”

“Yep”, she affirmed, rolling her first dice. “And don’t forget, my door’s always open”, pointing her thumb over her shoulder at the room. That morning past as one of the best ones I had in a while. Just Ian, Rhonda and I, eating our food, and playing monopoly.

Tuesday, morning, I quickly found Rhonda when Ian went to the bathroom. “Why is he here?” I asked her. She looked into my eyes for a moment, and reached down for my hand.

“Mary, Ian’s mom died a little while ago. He’s from the neighbourhood so his dad brought him here.” She kept looking at me with her knowing eyes. I nodded and went back to the table to start our game. Rhonda came too. For that day, we played clue.

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Once again, I enjoyed it just enough to escape. That evening, just as I was leaving, I turned to Rhonda, sitting at her desk.

“Rhonda?”

“Yes hun?”

“I think I’m ready to talk to you.” She smiled back happily at me, and shoed me out the door, to the waiting car of my mom.

On Wednesday, like the first day, Ian decided it was time for Scrabble. Dishing out the tiles, we chattered brightly, as easily as if we had been friends for a lifetime. My mind drifted to my morning drive...

The sun had poured into the car window as I sat in the passenger seat, watching the now familiar route.

“The school called” my mother had said.

“And?” I asked, mildly interested.

“They said you are welcome back whenever you are ready.” she answered. I felt a pang of excitement. “Maybe sometime soon?” She called out the car door as I walked up the the centre.

“Maybe sometime. Tomorrow... I think”. But I was decided.

Suddenly, I was brought back by Ian clearing his throat. Scrabble had finished, and he looked upset.

“Are you gonna head off then?” He asked, disappointment in his eyes. I hesitated for a moment, before reaching out to the stack of games.

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“Naw” I said, picking the box up. “I think I’m gonna stick around here for a while”,
as I dealt out the cards.