

SCOTT RANDALL

According To Hoyle

BLOODY KNUCKLES

Although the play and rules of the game now escape my memory, I can vividly recall the consequences of losing at a hand of Bloody Knuckles. The number of points lost in any given hand became the number of times one's opponent was allowed to bash the less fortunate gamesman's knuckles. If Hoyle ever considered such a game, I'm sure that he'd limit the instrument of reward and punishment to the fifty-two deck itself.

"Align the pack," he'd say, "into a tight tight tight pile and bring it down sharply upon the back of your opponent's hand."

The rules, as followed by my eight-year-old self, my older sister, and the boys from around the neighbourhood, permitted the use of any heavy object. Defeat could be administered with a sizable paperback of historical fiction from my mother's bookshelf, a CCM bicycle pump, a metal precision ruler or any rock from our back patio garden. By far the most effective tool, however, was the kitchen knife.

And the best kitchen knife in our house was, by far, the Henkels carver that sat in its own wooden block atop our kitchen counter. It had a lacquered hardwood handle and a long flexible blade, and it was my sister's favourite. Holding the very end of the blade to get as much bounce out of the metal as possible, June made me feel every foolish discard. The title of Victor has never meant more.

Mother would never have allowed her children to compete in a contest of this sort had she known the full extent of the rules. Despite what logic tells my memory, my father and I spent a Sunday afternoon carding and discarding on the back patio deck. Dad

wasn't one to concede a point and he wasn't one to let a child win at a card game. He'd have thought purposely losing would have been bad form, a poor lesson for any son to learn. Every hand he won, he again and again jokingly went along with the punishment that was suited to the game. He'd hold the deck high at arm's length, bring it down quickly, and then stop just above my hand. The deck would barely brush the back of my hand for every one of his smart plays and my foolish plays.

By the fourth or fifth hand, he was going to lengths to demonstrate how little effort was put into defeating me. He discarded absently while commenting on the weather. He propped his feet up on a facing lawn chair and stretched out to get some sun.

I remember his feet. They were sitting right next to me, after all. His feet were small for such a large man, curled with rough soles. Pigskins, that's how he described them, proud of the toughness that came from an island childhood. We didn't wear shoes, he'd say plainly. A framed photograph in our sitting room evidenced his claim. It was a black-and-white of Father and his three brothers, all dressed in their Wellington Elementary School blazers. The four of them were barefoot and I remember wondering what it would be like to grow up in such a place, in a place as different from Ontario winters as one could imagine.

Father's mind must have drifted because, at the end of one quick hand, I came out on top. As the victory was only chance and unlikely to repeat itself, I retrieved June's favourite tool from its wooden block on our kitchen counter. The impact of three raps with the full power of an eight-year-old arm left Father's right hand marked red.

Mother hadn't been paying much attention to the two of us until that point. She now turned and yelled at me in a voice she usually saved for my father.

"What do you think you're doing? This is a game, for goodness' sake. What has gotten into you that you think it's all right to go about acting like that to another human being? How would you have felt if your father was silly enough to do the—"

Father's swelling hand gently patted mother's shoulder.

"These are the rules of the game, dear. He's well within his rights to hit me as hard as he can. We both agreed to play the game and so we both agreed to play by the rules. And now we're going to play another hand."

He shuffled the cards and dealt a new game.

Father controlled the hand, won, and won by a single point; he won, I lost and he was making a point. Mother's anger shifted away from me immediately.

"If you think I'm going to let you hit him, you're not only mistaken, you're very stupid."

"We were playing by the rules, dear. Ronny knows the rules of the game and he knows what happens when you lose. Now, I am going to finish the game."

She shook her head and guided him into the house by his arm. They were gone for no more than a minute and I heard no yelling from either of them, but this was the way Mother operated, in a low voice that stated how things were and how things were going to be. By the time they returned, I was sure I wouldn't have to endure the punishment.

The Henkels knife from the wooden block on our kitchen counter was in my mother's hand and father trailed behind her.

"Your father's right. You were playing a game and you both understood the rules."

Father sat down across from me at the patio table and took the knife from Mother. Something obviously wasn't right. Mother was supposed to override him. She was supposed to come to my rescue.

"Put your hand on the table," he said.

I looked at my mother for defence but couldn't read her face. Father raised the knife up slow and brought it down fast; he stopped before making contact and gently tapped.

She took the knife from him and told both of us that that was enough cards for one day. Then she held out her hand for me.

"Why don't you come help me with the rest of dinner. Your father's going to go for a drive to calm his nerves."

Euchre

In this particular game, the king and the queen of any given suit are of less value than the jack.

The evening that June and I sat down with our parents at the dining room table to learn this four-handed game occurred when she and I were fifteen and thirteen respectively. With four players, there are three possible pairings for the proper euchre game. Father, however, refused to be on Mother's team.

"She takes the fun out of it for me," he explained.

By this, Father was objecting to her lack of competitive spirit; if you're going to bother to play, you play to win. I do believe that Mother could have played well if she had cared; her thoughts were merely elsewhere. While dealing she would ask about June's upcoming Science Fair. While collecting the discards, she would wonder aloud about Christmas shopping. While Father instructed us on strategy, she would put the kettle on for tea. Under his breath, he asked why she was playing at all.

His own skill at the game was maniacal. He could mentally keep track of discards and could approximate which cards were in whose hand with near perfect accuracy. When June was Father's partner, she won. When I was Father's partner, I won.

"I'm thinking of planting tulips along the outside of the back deck after the spring thaw this year," Mother said at one point.

"Spades are trump."

"They should come up nice. If the snow clears by late March, the yard will be ready for a barbeque by mid May."

"It's your lead, dear."

"Oh, I'm sorry, what was called?"

"Spades, dear."

Because June and I were fifteen and thirteen, we wanted to win. We took turns partnering with Father and then complained about the predictability of the outcomes.

"Oh. What harm would it do for you to play with me one or two games? Let the children play together."

He grumbled but agreed.

Luck, as it is said, runs in streaks, and June and I won three games in a row.

Father got up from the table and went to the coat closet. He was going for a drive to cool his head, Mother said. The two of us sat drinking Orange Pekoe with Mother and chatted about Christmas break.

Hearts

If one has learned the rules and play of euchre, picking up this game is quick and easy. What one wants to avoid are hearts and the queen of spades. The player with the least number of points, when some other player has lost by accumulating a hundred points, wins.

Father had lost all interest in a family game of euchre, but he agreed to hearts when mother insisted that the four of us needed to spend this time together around the dining room table. Beneath the table, Jenny purred and nudged feet for attention. I was to play the role of scorekeeper, one of the many roles that Father was recently insisting I take upon myself. June, although two years older, had never been given the responsibility and I remember feeling embarrassed for her.

I wrote four neat columns across the top of the scratchpad: "mum," "dad," "June," and "me." I was in control and I marvelled at the pronoun that so pointedly placed me in control.

While Father went over the rules with June and me, Mother lifted the tablecloth to pat Jenny.

"I don't know what's gotten into that cat, she doesn't want to do anything but cuddle all day. Never used to be so affectionate."

After three hands of play, Father predictably had the lowest score. Between hands he insisted that the object was to gang up on the winner and attempted to incite competition.

"Come after me or you'll all going to regret it."

I doodled on the scratchpad while he dealt the cards.

"Ron, pay attention."

It was either June or Mother who noticed what was going on under the table, I can't remember. Jenny, who had always been a heavy cat, was going into labour and making a bloody mess under our dining-room table.

The game was, of course, forgotten. We gathered a cardboard box from the basement and lined it with a wool blanket. All four of us sat around waiting until my mother noticed the late hour and sent me and June to bed.

"I have no idea how long this will take, and the two of you have to get up tomorrow."

Yawning, Father announced that he too was going to turn in. He said he'd see how many kittens were squeezed out the next day and gave my mother a kiss on the cheek.

Unable to sleep, I listened for activity downstairs from my bed. I heard the sound of mother walking up the stairs, a footfall that was quieter than my father's, and I stood by my bedroom door to listen. There was crying from my mother, followed by a muffled conversation and grumblings from my father as he made his way downstairs.

The next morning, Jenny had five of the smallest animals I had ever seen sucking from her tummy. Both of my parents had stayed up all night and the lack of sleep made them at once angry and sad. During breakfast, Mother told us that one of the kittens was born dead, a poor runt that was wrapped in a plaid dishtowel and placed inside a shoe box. Father had finished burying it just before we got up, a responsibility that I could tell he resented by his silence.

After breakfast, June and I returned to watch the kittens feed while Mother cleaned up the kitchen and father went for a drive to clear his mind.

Solitaire

There are versions of solitaire that are so seldom played out one must conclude that they were designed for the player to lose. Still, they do help pass the time.

June decided to continue her degree studies over the summer that year; she had visited Father's condominium once during her reading week and hadn't spoken to him since. I became his only child and managed to pretty much fulfil my promise of weekly visits. Mother and her husband seldom asked where I was heading off to Sunday afternoons, but they knew enough not to hold dinner for me.

I remember the television was continuously flickering when I visited, often the only light turned on. Father didn't answer my knock that day, but yelled from his brown vinyl lazy boy. A game of solitaire was laid out on the ottoman and he held his hand to his chin considering.

"Hi."

"Hello, son."

"Good game?"

"I haven't picked up yet, just thinking about my options. Would you like coffee?"

"Tea?"

"Don't drink the stuff and I don't have any in the house."

"Maybe I'll have a coffee later."

I recognized the game. The deck is spread down in eight columns of six cards, two face up and four down. The remaining four cards are an out if you can't move.

"I bought a paper on my way over."

"Check it yet?"

"Yeah, on the subway."

"And?"

"It's a four show, we have lots of time."

"Do you feel like a couple rounds of gin?"

"Yeah, all right. Play out what you're doing first, though."

"I've already lost. Three of the kings showing and two aces at the bottom of the rows."

He swept the cards up in seconds and shuffled.

Poker

Stag parties for grooms over the age of fifty are pretty much limited to poker and alcohol; as host, this suited me just fine.

The games of poker played at stag parties are also limited. One can play five card draw or one can play seven card stud. What one cannot indulge in are the more social variations of the game—no "Idiot," no "Christ on the Cross" and no "Running Baseball." As Father put it to Ray, a co-worker and a guest that evening, "Let's not fuck about."