



19 Hand

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Prompt: Personal Essay Competition 2024



2

Standing in the garden without my shoes on, I look around. Last year, when I was here, I was only happy. This year, I can't seem to help noticing everything that's wrong.

"It looks weird," I say, "without any plants over there. But it was smart, to add the grass. At least there's something."

Immediately, I feel like a jerk. My dad's been out here for three weeks, already, working eight-hour days to make everything nice for the memorial. I've only been here forty minutes, and already I've made things worse without even trying.

"I mean it looks nice," I add. "Like, I can tell you've done a lot of work."

My dad stands, silent, leaning against his shovel. I stare down at my socks, which are getting mud-soaked in the damp grass. They stare back.

"You know what," he says, finally. I look up. He digs the shovel into the grass so that it stays, then glances at me. "Let's play crib."

I haven't played crib since March. I know he knows this. I know he hasn't played either, the same way I know that we look exactly the same and therefore unlike anyone else in the family. There is a shared understanding we have that no one else is privy to; which might be why I say, "Okay."



He's already walking back toward the cabin. I make my way over to the small table under the awning and sweep away the bugs and leaves, careful not to kill anything. Then I pull up two white, plastic outdoor chairs, which are seconds away from falling apart. I sit.

It feels weird being out here in a way I expected, but hadn't, it seems, properly prepared for. The whole flight over, I sat in the middle seat beside my mum in disbelief, like my body had packed and gotten on the subway and boarded the plane without my even realizing, and it was only there, trapped in the sky, that my brain was given permission to ask questions. I wonder, sitting here while my heel taps against the concrete, how my dad was able to withstand three weeks of this alone.

He comes back out a few minutes later, carrying the wooden board and a deck of cards, which he hands to me. I shuffle, grateful to feel the mat beneath my fingers, the uneasy give of a deck that's played too many hands. My dad places the board in the very middle of the table; I put the deck beside it, and we both cut. The cards give him the deal.

My dad gets five points in the pegging portion; I get two. I put my hand down first and count.

"Fifteen two, fifteen four, a pair is six, and a matching jack is seven," I say. My dad looks it over; I have a tendency to count wrong.

"Fifteen two," he says, once I've taken my points, "and a double run for eight is ten." He opens his crib; no points, which in crib is called nineteen. "Nineteen," he says.

"Remember when—" I begin, and don't continue. We keep playing.

There's five or six other people at the cabin right now; three more down at the beach who will be back soon. Everyone's running around trying to get things together for the memorial, but the yard is so massive, we could go hours without seeing any of them. It



makes it more difficult, in some ways. I keep thinking *she's sitting on the steps, reading*; I keep having to remind myself that she isn't.

As the game goes on, though, I stop thinking about that, and instead I start thinking about how I might beat my dad, for once. He's a better player than me, but I get a couple of beautiful hands, and suddenly the game's tying up.

"I knew I shouldn't have thrown you that eight," he says, as I count up to 106, four points behind him. "I knew I shouldn't have."

"Oh well," I say. My mouth, at this point, has stopped trembling; my heart has slowed close to its resting pace, and only beats faster now at the prospect of beating him. He takes the cards and deals.

The game goes to 120; he gets eight points in pegging, but I get five, and I count first.

"Fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six, fifteen eight, and a pair," I say, "makes ten."

It might be the closest crib game I've ever played, and I feel elated at the victory. I count out my points, and, just like that, it's over.

"Good game," he says.

"Good game," I say back.

Around us, the birds chirp in the trees. The grass grows where the tomatoes used to be. I picture my grandma walking outside, asking us how the game went, smiling widely when she hears that I've won. In my mind, my dad switches places with her, like he did last summer. *Good luck with the master*, he tells me. She laughs.

I miss her. We both do. I don't need to say it. I can see it in the way he's smoking, the tilt of his head. I know it more deeply than I've maybe known anything. But we've managed to play crib again, and



it didn't ruin everything. And I don't know how to make sense of it; I'm starting to think maybe I never will.

"Do you want to play again?" I ask.

"Sure," he says.

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