

Double Solitaire

I flip the deck between my hands. The edges are soft and frayed after years of play. We've played cards here: double solitaire. He recalls playing it when he was little, with his great big family, likely tucked in a cabin on a lake somewhere swathed in tall, deep green pine-trees. He says they played it on long tables – crafted by caring, present hands – versing each other, switching opponents until too many had drifted outside to continue. He taught me when I was little, too.

I lay the cards on the couch beside me.

Now, our games are paired with political debate. Playing against him is fun, I suppose. I always beat him, but every time I let emotion crawl up my throat, it still feels as if he has won. I hate that: him getting the satisfaction of being level-headed, when we are both ignoring the bruise on his face and the shake of his hands.

The couch is stiff. I don't feel comfort and warmth from its cushions – the kind that creeps into the fibres of a piece of well-loved living room furniture – despite the fray of its armrests. DVDs line a shelf beside a cheap TV; PG movies, nothing recent. Ludo, Scrabble, Monopoly, Cluedo, Candyland. Board games sit disorderly on the tall shelf, haphazardly stacked, the corners of the boxes rounded, raw cardboard. In fact, everything in this room is worn like the card deck and the couch and the board games.

I hear a knock at the door, and his head pokes in. Grey streaks his gelled hair. Sometimes, when I'm in an angsty mood, I'll compare our faces. Just to see how similar we are. We both bear dark, purply circles beneath our eyes. This is thanks to genetics, I know, but mine are also due to staying up too late reading. His are because he is sick. The hollows of his cheeks are unnatural, ghastly almost. It's hard to believe he is the same man in the photos from my first few years of life, cheeks full and pink. The same man who was meant to raise me. His nose is flat and crooked from breaking so many times, and I often wonder if it used to look like mine: pointy and straight. I can't remember.

I stand up to hug him, feeling the gentle embrace of his arms, a lack of strength. I inhale the scent of medication and nicotine gum.

He's been here five weeks now (it's not the first time and I'm sure it won't be the last), and every week I catch the bus here after school, worming through the narrow halls and into this room, deep in the building's guts. Today will be the same as always. Perhaps we will watch a movie, play a new game, just talk. But no, we can never agree on a movie, we have always played the same card game and always will, and we cannot just talk. Just talking means pauses in conversation not filled by the shuffle of cards, the laughs accompanying a strategic move, or casual chatter – 'I need a king of hearts really bad!' Without the cards, the silence sounds like the messages in my phone begging me to see him, and the doctor's words.

And so we play double solitaire. There are no silences unoccupied by the thwip of cards. And yet, I still hear the clink of green glass bottles and sluggish words over the phone in the back of my head. I try not to think about what happened to get us both here, try not to visualise past memories when I look at his face. Him on the floor of his flat; watching him walk down the street in search of a liquor store; his bargaining voice through the walls, laced with something more; the shake of his seizing body.

I try to want to be here, in this phony living room with him, but I don't think I do. I feel the minutes tick by, like the room is watching me. His face kills me, it's sick. Sick. Sick. Sick. And then I feel bad for not wanting to be here. I hope he can't see it on my face.

No matter how many years I age, my memories seem to burn inevitably bright and vivid, like coloured pencils and glass bottles. People tell me I think a lot, stuck in my head, but I've found peace here, it's cosy.

After the two hours are over, I will leave, taking something with me. The something in the air when I see him. The something that I keep deep in my chest which makes my friends uncomfortable when I talk about him. The something that forces a squawk of laughter whenever I mention him, which I rarely do; the subtle drip of sarcasm that must partner my every word. The something that reminds me that other kids don't feel the same way when they smell alcohol.

In primary school, I only ever had friends who had normal families – two parents at home. They couldn't grasp why my mum couldn't spare the time to take us to the mall, why I didn't get money for doing my chores. They didn't understand my something, they couldn't. My confessions were always met with awkward silence, a rift formed between me and the other ten-year-olds.

Now that I'm in high school, I've met new people with complicated families. I revel in exchanging emotions, retelling our pasts, searching for someone who understands. Still, my stories are different from theirs. My something escapes my mouth and I feel it tint their view of me. I see their brains visualise my stories, and they go silent.

Now, my something mostly stays in my chest.

We finish the game – me: a reigning champion – and start another. He asks about school, what movies I've watched and books I've read recently. I reply like I'm meant to. He tells me about the people he's met here.

Sometimes, when I'm waiting for him, I see them through the glass pane in the door. It pains me to admit I'm afraid of them. I shouldn't be, they are like him. Sick. Eaten alive by their own brain, compelling them to drink, swallow, smoke; drawn like ants to sugar, rodents to poison. I can't understand them; him. I'm told they can't control it, but I won't believe it.

I want to scream at him, cry. Will he stop then? Will he understand it isn't only him he's hurting? That I don't want to be here, in a rehab family room, pretending everything is okay? The something chokes me, threatening to rip out of my chest, up my throat.

Over and over, I think it would have been better if it was his body that was sick rather than his mind. Perhaps it would have been easier knowing he had no control over it. Then the guilt swallows me into the stiff, odd couch. Tears that sting my eyes threaten the safety of my facade. I don't tell him what I think. I smile, laugh, and place my last card.

Another win for me.

The two hours tick by and the glass-paned door swings open. Leaning in from the doorway, a young lady with thin, rectangle glasses and an ever-sympathetic expression tells us our time is over. I replace the cards on the couch, and I hug him, with the eye contact of a dog who's chewed up a nice shoe. Then we make our separate ways down opposite ends of the narrow, white-walled hallway.

I visit the bathroom first, hiding from an air-conditioned, claustrophobic waiting room, expecting a text from my mum to say she's here to pick me up. When it dings on my phone screen, I return back down the hall, glancing in the worn, not-quite room with the stiff couch. Something catches my eye.

Looking through the glass of the door, I see a boy around my age.

He picks up the deck of cards I left on the couch, moving it over in his hands.

I think I see something in his eyes.