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Poker Night

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Poker Night at Shaw's

"What the hell was that?!" Shaw yelled, dropping his two playing cards on the poker table. Annoyingly enough he had a two of hearts and a three of clubs; his straight bluffing face would have won him some chips this hand. He picked them up hastily, but I was the only one who had seen them. Everyone else was looking around to see where the noise had come from.

Almost at the same time as the strange noise, which sounded like some sort of sci-fi ray gun, the lights went out. A half second later a pot fell, a woman screamed in pain, and hot water mixed with steamy rice dribbled into the living room. The night, it would seem, was officially over.

The night officially began around ten when I arrived at my friend Shaw's house for his weekly poker night. Although these nights of cards and alcohol were frequent events, this would be my first appearance at one of them. To call Shaw my friend would be a bit exaggerated, although we'd known each other since college. He ran with the elite social circles in our New Haven school, a high life afforded by his rich family ties and astonishing passing record as starting quarterback on the football team. We had been roommates and he had been nice enough to let me tag along when he went out to selective parties and clubs, allowing me to bask in the limelight while he took center stage. These situations were always a bit odd; I always felt as if there were people looking at me and shaking their heads. Long stares and quiet whispers followed me at these places; my existence was only noticeable when I was near Shaw. I was a shadow, a figure that had just managed to sneak into places right as the door was closing.

The front door opened only just enough to look outside and not let any of the snow in. I was greeted by Mary, Shaw's wife of fourteen years. She kissed me on both cheeks and told me to come inside. The weather had been bad in northern Massachusetts, and the snow hadn't let up in days. To make things worse, a lightning storm was passing through, making for an unusual combination of dark white and electric yellow nights.

"Come on in dear, the boys are just sitting down," Mary told me, then went on into her usual gossip. "Did you hear what happened?"

I shook my head. I never kept up with the local hearsay, I was always buried at my typewriter trying to crank out something for the editors.

“The Remington girl had been having an affair with the mailman. Right under our noses! And to think I used to lend her stamps,” I liked Mary, but she could go on chattering about local gossip for hours. One night a couple of years ago when Shaw was drunk he confessed to have married “that silly girl” to get in on her family’s fortune. Shaw had always been looking for new ways to climb higher on the money tree.

After a brief walk through the ebony halls I ended up in the living room. A fire was crackling, throwing shadows on the faces of the men around the table. Empty beer bottles dotted the room, a pile was building at Shaw’s seat. Shaw stood up and gave me a crushing handshake. Twenty years had passed since he put on his helmet and pads, but he stilled looked like he could wrestle a bear.

“How the hell are you, kid?” Shaw barked, and handed me a beer. “Mary why don’t you actually do something around here and fix us some food? Jesus Christ, we’re starving.” Shaw always treated people like this. The men at the table looked down at their cards as Shaw’s wife hurried out of the room.

I always felt out of place at these things, it had been this way since college. Shaw’s friends had all come from wealthy families up north, and had been nicely placed in high class jobs after their time in school. While they went on to run steel corporations, railroad companies and law firms, I made ends meet by writing pieces for semi-prestigious literary magazines and newspapers. That’s just way things have always been. While they had their lucrative checks and stock records lying around casually, I had rough drafts of articles and stories, freckled with my editor’s blue ink.

I threw my coat on the sofa with the others. It was probably the most inexpensive one there, by about two hundred dollars or so. Shaw killed another beer and started dealing the cards and was commenting about the weather when he was cut short by a crack of thunder. He swore and kept dealing. Through the windows I could see the snow falling in milky white sheets. After two hands Mary walked in with some rolls.

“Now what the hell is this?” Shaw was pissed, as usual. “Mary, can’t you bring us something with some goddamn substance? Like some steak or something?”

“I have some rice on in the stove,” she said meekly.

“That will have to do for now. Jesus Christ.” Shaw’s words were beginning to run into each other. He turned back to the poker table and went on about how his wife was always screwing up, loud enough for her to hear.

“Shaw, let’s just play,” I said quietly. I didn’t want this to situation to become any more uncomfortable than it had to. Shaw would keep going in he was allowed, and he had already been drinking.

He wasn’t finished. The kitchen was connected to the dining room so Mary could hear every drunken

word as her husband berated the weather and her, but mostly her. The other card players just looked at their cards. In our junior year in college, Shaw got into a fight when he was drunk. I think it was cold and lightening that night too. The guy was sputtering blood and teeth but Shaw just kept hitting away and it took three guys to pull him off. Images of that night flashed back as I listened to him go at his wife. I could see through the kitchen door that she was beginning to sob.

All of a sudden, thunder cackled again, this time followed by the sound of the electric wires outside snapping. The windows shuddered and the lights went out. Mary, who was moving a boiling pot of rice must have slipped and dropped the contents on her foot. She screamed in the darkness.

"Jesus Christ." Shaw stood up. In front of the dancing flames of the fireplace he looked pretty damn scary. He threw on a coat and hat and went outside to see what had happened. In his haste, he hit the corner of the poker table with his knee. In the dark I could see beer and poker chips swirling around on floor.

I pulled out my lighter and made my way to the kitchen. I helped move Mary to the sofa and wrapped up her foot. I thanked her, told her I was sorry for the evening and made my way for the door. I was putting on my coat and walking out when I passed Shaw stumbling in. He held the door open for me one last time as I left.

Julian Ybarra, '08