

Dropping back to Punt

Cribbage was the game my brother and father played, the two of them stretched on the living-room rug in front of the television with its Sunday afternoons of football or basketball or baseball, neither father nor son paying attention to the television until the crowd would cheer and they would look up, distracted from their game.

Mother-May-I was the game my brother and I played winter nights with our mother in the living room and down the hall while our father was away at one of the wars, his latest letter on the table by the door, still unread in its envelope while our mother taught us to ask the proper permission for every move we thought to make.

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My memory of my brother and father playing cribbage on the rug on Sundays while the television spilled its world of sports into our living room is toned with the dulling shade of my ignorance of cribbage, its varnished board, its colored pegs and deck of cards. But I never wanted to play, even if they had invited me. I preferred to retire to my room by myself after saying, “Mother, may I go to my room?”, and with her blessing me closing the door behind me and spreading my toy soldiers, tanks and warplanes on my rug to set up and play out yet another re-enactment of the bombing of a European harbor, the storming of some Blue or Red beach, or a desperate last-ditch stand in the jungle against overwhelming odds.

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The Sunday dishes, stacks of pans and plates and pots from a respectable dinner of roast, potatoes, onions and carrots, were washed by my mother and dried by me while the television was being turned on, the cribbage board was being set up, the cards were dealt and the crib was formed, and the first few peggings were being played. My mother could have used a daughter, I believe. My father had my brother, named after an uncle who had died in one of the wars, but my mother had me, named after her secret lost true love of long ago. She didn’t demand that I play house with her instead of war with myself, but she couldn’t keep from telling me from time to

time that I was pretty, and from telling me to help her with the dishes while the boys played.

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Here I am now, decades beyond those Sunday afternoons, in a place where my own son, his mother absent through no fault of his own, stands in front of the television and watches football games while I stand at the kitchen sink to wash the smattering of dishes from a Sunday featuring a few bites to eat in this home where no one has to ask permission to be alone and where, when stories of war are shown on television, they are what I watch. All my son's pleading will not get me to change the channel back to football or over to any other game. If his disposition turns, I send him to his room and close his door behind him. He settles down to play with his toys.

Sometimes I go outside and peek in through his bedroom window to watch him play. I watch him from where he cannot see me as he takes his fleets of cars and trucks and divides them into opposing teams. Later, when the clattering tackling of tiny motor vehicles is done, he hugs a teddy bear and lays himself down among his toys, rocking himself to sleep. I return to the living room, sit in front of the television, turn the sound down low while fighter planes strafe.