

## Headed Home

I am sitting here attempting to define myself as I often do at times like this. My bubbly-soled blue and white basketball shoes don't really match my Gap kacky's. My all white T-shirt says "POSER" in bold black letters, and my carry on is a faded green canvas army bag. There is a fresh looking coffee stain on the seat and blue-gray carpet next to me. I am watching people and making up stories to their lives. The couple that embraces to my left met in college at a small gathering of close friends, one of whom introduced them in a hopeful but outwardly casual way. The man a few seats to my left, sits next to his briefcase reading the Wall Street Journal, and is obviously all business. He will ride first class to some important business meeting in New York or Chicago, make what I am sure is a very "important business transaction", only to return to his suburban home with his non-confrontational wife and rebellious teenage daughter. Who, unbeknownst to her parents, and at the age of fifteen, has already had sex with at least three different trouble-maker-type boys.

I notice myself falling from playful narration to judgmental pigeonholing and attempt to draw my attention elsewhere.

Airports are surreal. I never feel like I am totally there, or here as the case would be. I am always focused on a goal, idea, or memory beyond the tarmac. They are junctures that join pieces of peoples lives together in a way only mass transit can, but rarely leave any lasting impression themselves. I have spent the last month in Hawaii to be the best man at my best friends wedding. He needed help finishing the new house. It was a chance for me to get away from high stress inner city remodeling and do some real

construction under the Hawaiian sun. Now, I am sitting in the monstrous and horribly confusing LAX, headed back to New York City. I haven't been this close to home in nine years.

I grew up not too far from here just north of Santa Barbara. The other boys in the neighborhood and I had had a boys only club called "The Rawhide Posse". Most of the time we would just get together and work on our fort, or make up anti-girl initiation rules. On one of the few occasions that we left the fort, to do something besides collecting frogs for our continually dying collection, we attacked an old cabin in the woods beyond our neighborhood.

The board and batten siding had that gray weathered color and leaned slightly west with the rest of the house. Remnants of a chicken wire fence had lain outside the rusty-hinged door. Inside, only two of the four walls had had plywood to cover the insulation, and the white cabinets were dinged and scratched. We tore the place apart, flipping tables, chairs, breaking plates, and emptying drawers of mouse-shit-covered silverware into the sink. Blankets and sword like sticks flew through the air. As we stormed through the small cabin, the speed and fury of our movements increased. It wasn't until I heard the glass flute of a kerosene lantern shatter against the spruce plank floor that I realized we had gone too far. I remember being terrified. It wasn't so much fear of our parents finding out, I was scared of what we had done, I was scared of myself. A rusty can of beans rolled across the floorboards. I looked up at one of the boys; when our eyes met he jumped and bolted for the door. I jumped a chair, but tripped on a box of kindling. The rest of the boys raced past me as I climbed back to my feet. I was no

longer running. The fear-induced adrenaline that coursed through my body was thrilling and I stood there letting it build inside me until the pressure was too much. As I dashed out I snatched a red deck of cards off a shelf by the door. We all went to our respective homes without saying a word. No one ever found out about that day, but I got my share.

Two weeks later my mother was killed by three drunk teens in a red and white Chevy pickup who veered off the road and onto the sidewalk while she was on one of her evening walks. I did not talk to anyone about it. The Rawhide Posse never met again.

I idly spin, cut, and flip the deck in my left hand. The soft edges are comforting. I consider bridging the cards through the air from one hand to the other to impress the boy who sits across from me with watchful eyes, but opt not to. Ever since I was eleven, when I stole this deck from an old cabin behind my house, I have been fascinated with cards. I remember sitting in my room while the other kids were at school. I would sit in my room and stare at the cards while my father communicated with friends and relatives. On one of my few trips down the stairs into the realm of wet cheeks, tissue paper, and low stifled voices, I grabbed a book of card tricks from a bookshelf, and spent the next few school-free weeks learning tricks and trick technique. Every now and then people would come up to see how I was doing, and I would show them my newest trick, but they always seemed more distracted than impressed.

After awhile, everyone left, I went back to school, and my father went back to work. It didn't last long though, work, for my Dad. He quit his job after his boss of fourteen years recommended he: "take a vacation until you feel you're ready to come back."

“I don’t need no god-damn vacation. I need a fucking Job!” He would exclaim with fingers wrapped around a flask of “Jackie Daniels ma boy! Your pappy’s one true love.” The only light that lit the house during those dark December months was “The Simpsons”, “Cops”, latenight “\*M\*A\*S\*H\*” reruns among other evening fox shows, a bedside lamp at the kitchen table which was used to read the want ads, and a faint glow of Christmas lights from the neighbors’ houses. It wasn’t so much an issue of saving money in electricity bills. It just never occurred to us to turn on the lights; even if it had it never would have seemed appropriate or worth the energy.

In the absence of external daylight, the lights in the airport have that all too familiar fluorescent-flicker. I am tired, and I can feel the beginnings of a headache in the presence of the lights. The boy who was watching my hands ever so closely is sleeping uncomfortably in the black airport seats. His mother is idly combing his hair with her fingers as she stares out the window at the plane we are all waiting to board. She gives the appearance of exhaustion and absence. She is ready to return to her familiar house, with her familiar bed, familiar flowers, loving husband and comfortably familiar lifestyle. When she turns her eyes to her son, she is looking in him more than at him. Watching her watch him I know that she would swallow him up in her heart to protect him. Sighing in painful resignation she returns her gaze to the window.

“Mom! Guess what... Guess what Mom! Hey Mom!”

“Sweet-heart, don’t pull on my sweater. Can’t you see that I am talking to Mary right now?”

“Well, it’s just that I’m in a hurry, and I just wanted to show you that I found six eggs already.”

“That’s great Honey! I bet there’s still a lot more out there though.”

“I know. Jimmy already has eight, but I’m next behind him. I gotta go.”

“Ok, do you want me to hold on to those while you go looking?”

“No, I got ‘em.” I started to run off, then turned around. “Thanks though.” She smiled and winked; I smiled back.

“I found another one!” Mike yelled as he clambered up an alder to grab an egg out of a nook in the branches, that was his fourth. I remember thinking that it was “pretty cool” that year, my birthday was on Friday, Dan Peterson’s was on a Wednesday. Our parents had let us combine them on Easter since there wasn’t school the next day. Dan and I had turned eight that day. It dawned on me that I had never known my friends’ moms’ names. I had always thought of them as ‘Kenny’s mom, James’ mom, Jim’s mom, Mikey’s mom, and Bobby’s mom’. They had all been talking about us; they usually did when they got together. At the time I had thought that they did it just to embarrass us. My Dad was walking around with Dan P. and Kenny Walters’ Dads. They had hidden the eggs, and were talking about boring “grown-up” stuff while they watched us search.

“An eighty-seven!?! Well that’s a personal best isn’t Mark?” My dad asked.

“Two birdies, and only five double bogies. You better believe it is!” Mark was Dan’s Dad.

“It’s days like that that keep you hooked.” Said Jeff, Kenny’s dad.

“That and days like last Tuesday. I couldn’t par to save my life.” Scoffed my dad.

“Well, after all:”

In unison: “Golf *is* a four letter word.” They laughed. Dad had tried to take me golfing once... I hated it, still do. I think he was kinda disappointed, but mom had said he was just “having a rough day”. I remember thinking that I had caused some kind of conflict between them. Mom and Dad had been good about hiding their personal problems from me, if they had had any, except that day. They had yelled at each other. That was really the only time I ever saw them fight. Thinking back, that was probably my best birthday ever; they gave me a new bike.

When my eyes open, my heart races for a moment until I see that the plane is still parked outside the window. I am sitting here wondering where my dad went, but it was only a dream. We were sitting in these very seats, talking about the mother and child that sit across from me now. I remember feeling anxious throughout the entire conversation, as if there was something I needed to tell, or ask him, but he did all the talking. I haven’t seen my father in over nine years.

Dad had a job with the postal service. He had finally landed this job after many failed attempts to return to the Civil Engineering field. The fact that he had spent two months in an isolated AA retreat, and still attended AA meetings semi-weekly was a black eye to his resumé. A few friends had gotten him hired for brief amounts of time, out of what I am sure was sympathy, but eventually he got laid off because he had “a lack

of focus, motivation, and enthusiasm for his work” or “his negative, depressing attitude did not match the company’s positive workplace theme”.

I dropped out of school two weeks into my sophomore year, and got a job at Burger King for a year before trying my hand at prep cooking for a local 4-star restaurant. After dropping out of school my relationship with my dad seemed cold and overly professional. It was more like having a roommate than living with my father. He worked days Monday through Friday, and I worked nights Saturday through Wednesday. During the day I surfed, read Michael Crichton novels and listened to Metallica. On Friday nights I partied with psuedo-friends and often did card tricks to impress girls. Thursday was “father-son night” at the bowling alley. The conversation never made it past our score, the weather, or work. We didn’t even critique each others bowling technique for christ’s sake.

A few months before I would have graduated, I was offered a job in northern California as a laborer on a framing crew. My relationship with my dad was virtually non-existent, and I didn’t want to be around when my peers graduated. I took the job. I spent the summer working and living with a couple guys in Sacramento. I enjoyed working outdoors doing something that seemed to matter. It was inspiring to watch the houses rise up around me and think that I had been a part of it.

When I returned home in October I was filled with youthful vigor and high hopes. As I walked in the door, I felt my self-confidence slither from my soul. Dad sat on the couch watching women’s billiards on ESPN 2. All he said was “Hey, how long you gonna be around?” I didn’t know what to say. I just stood there, staring at him, while he drank his coke. Finally, I just walked up the stairs and dropped my bags in my room. I

didn't stay long. I flew out to Colorado a week and a half later and got a job with another construction crew. I wasn't around the house much during that last week and a half. I think the only thing I said to him besides an awkward goodbye on my way out the door was "We're out of toilet paper and toothpaste."

A formal-feminine voice comes over the intercom, "Flight 873 departing for Denver, and going on to New York City is beginning pre-boarding. All first class passengers, passengers accompanying small children, or any other passengers requiring extra time to board the aircraft may board at this time. This is pre-boarding only, general boarding will begin shortly. Thank you for your patience."

I am still thinking of my father. I haven't been this close to home since I left. Supposedly he is still in and around the Santa Barbara area. I wonder what it would be like to see him? Is he happy, successful, homeless, drunk...?

General boarding has started. People are bustling about now; gathering their travel pillows and stretching their faces awake with their hands. The businessman who sat next to me is already on the plane. The boy's mother across from me is gently shaking and whispering him awake. He moans but does not open his eyes. The idea of not getting on the plane is tempting in its irrationality. The people around me with their long, tired faces seem so bound. Am I free enough to stay in this very seat and watch my plane lift above the runway?

The boy is awake now. He is putting on his coat, and his mother is packing his teddy bear into her black samsonite brand travel bag. I pull out the deck of cards.

"Excuse me miss, do you play cards?" I ask.

She looks at the deck I am shuffling on my knee, and has a slightly frightened, and annoyed look on her face. “I really don’t have time, we are next to board this plane.”

“Yes well, I understand that, but... Do you know the order of winning hands in Poker?”

“I’ve played a little.” She is trying to ignore me. I’m sure she assumes this is some sort of bad pick up line.

“Well you see, I am trying to decide whether I am going to get onboard the plane or not. I figure that if I deal myself five cards and beat three of a kind I will stay, otherwise I will return home to New York. I just need someone to cut the cards and witness the outcome.”

Confusion draws over her face. She looks around the airport, at people getting on board. Her face resolves into aggravated acceptance. “Go ahead, but *I am* getting on the plane, no matter how good of a hand you get.” She stays standing, but her son who still lies across his two seats is watching again.

“Hey mister, can *I* cut the deck for you?” I look up at his mother. She just nods.

“Make it a good one.” I slide the cards across the floor to the kid. He rolls forward on one arm, and reaches down with the other to grab the top quarter of the deck. His small shaky hand drops the cards just to the left of the original stack. He rolls back and sits up to watch. I grab the larger stack and slide the rest over next to my bag. The aged cards between my fingers, and butterflies in my stomach remind me of sitting on my bed at home trying to “see” the next card in the deck before looking at it.

The cards are sticky, and as I toss them to the carpet, the idea of not winning crystallizes in my head. The odds of dealing three of a kind from a standard deck are 1 in

46. The last card lands. Lying there on the carpet they seem so absolute. In that moment of reality and disappointment I know I will not win. I know that I should return to New York and find a new job, pay long overdue bills, meet with friends, clean my house and do my laundry. I have played poker for money, I had even used the deck to determine similar such paths in my life. The difference was that it in the past it had never mattered if I won or lost. I had never bet more than I could loose. This time it would seem that the stakes were too high, and all I could do was fold in fear.

“Hey Mister? Are you gonna look at your cards or what?”

“Look, I can’t wait around all day, I do have a *plane* to catch.”

“Sorry to keep you, I guess the cards don’t matter after all. I, like you, am getting on the plane.”

“Ahh!” She scoffs and her shoulders drop in frustration. “Come on Michael, lets go.” She grabs her son by the arm and storms off toward the gate.

I gather my belongings placing them in my bag, and leave the five cards face down on the carpet. I walk to the end of the line behind the child and his mother. She obviously doesn’t want to talk. Michael however, is twisting and tugging against her tight grip. He feels the impending doom of the plane ride and return to serial life. I look down and he smiles up at me with one of those innocent ear-to-ear smiles that come from children that are unaware of the tension in the air. I used to smile like that. It’s the type of smile that brings you back to your senses, back to what is really important.

I lift my bag from the floor and walk away from the line, away from the seat, away from the cards. I walk by gates where people with too much hairspray wait to board, past Burger King, TCBY, Starbuck’s, and Mr. News’ newsstand. I walk through

the security gates, past the ticket counters of every international airline along the Pacific Ocean. I walk straight out the front door and into a cab.

My baggage is going to New York, but I am going to “the greyhound station please.”

It’s only a few hours to Santa Barbara along highway 1, but the bus has made many stops. I have been on the road for almost five hours, and we are only a little over half way. I know I shouldn’t be here right now, but that is the best part. The cards were laid out before me, and I turned the other way. We stop in a town that seems to consist of a gift shop, gas station, beachfront motel and bus stop. I get out to stretch my legs; the early morning sky is deep blue and cloudless. The rocky face behind the store is steep, damp and covered with the greenery of my youth. There is a switchback trail that leads up to the low bluff edge.

I begin to hike. It is a well packed, but narrow trail. There is a small amount of gravel in the red dirt. I look down at the bus, which is turning back into traffic. There’ll be another one. The freedom I feel is intoxicating; I can’t get enough. Even I don’t know my next move, and it is a little scary when I think how easy it would be to jump. I look up the trail and take off running. The pacific air fills my lungs and I feel like a kid again.

When I reach the top, a west wind hits me in the face. I look down at the gift shop, and road to an outcropping of rocks beyond the shoreline. My eyes follow my shadow to the horizon. My mother has been dead for fifteen years and I haven’t even visited her grave. I can no longer hide. I pull the incomplete deck from my pocket. When I remove the cards from the blue tattered box it falls to the ground. The edges are

dirty and worn from years of use. I look at the bottom of the deck and a water-stained king of hearts stares back at me. I pull the deck back over my shoulder and cast out to sea. The wind flutters the cards back into my face. Briefly, I wonder what cards are missing, then I realize that I don't care.