

WAR AND PEACE

“ Alright, Mom, what card did you throw?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do. Count the symbols, one...two...three..four. It’s a four. You threw a four of hearts.”

“If you say so.”

“And what did I throw?”

“I don’t know. What did you throw?”

“A six, do you see it?”

“Yes, I see.”

“So who wins? I threw a six and you threw a four. Which card is higher?”

”I don't know.”

“A six beats a four, you lose.”

She laughs. She likes it when I’m decisive. And she looks good, nails painted, white hair recently trimmed, all by her girlfriend Blanche, a retired cosmetologist. Blanche is her alter ego, married three times - my mother once.

“How’s Blanche, Mom?”

“Old.”

My mother live s in an upstate suburb and we’re out on the deck with a with a view of the neighbors’ yards, locust and poplar trees, squirrels scampering along the cedar fences surrounding the swimming pools.

“Your turn, Mom.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Throw down a card, but this time keep your finger on it so you remember what you threw.”

She throws a ten. I have to put her finger on it.

“What is it, Mom? What’s the card?”

“I don’t know.”

“Count the symbols.”

“I don’t know, I can’t count.”

“Try!”

She can’t do it. She doesn’t remember if she ate her breakfast. She’s forgotten her grandchildren’s names.

A year ago we could play blackjack - she needed help counting to twenty-one but we muddled through. Now we’re down to War and it’s not working.

“Mom, do you still want to play?”

“Yeah!”

I shouldn’t be impatient. I should forget the rules because she just likes the action, being with her son, picking up cards, having something do with her hands.

But I’m stubborn. I have my own reasons for sticking to the rules. I want her to understand what’s happening. I want her to think.

I throw a Queen.

“What’s that, Mom? What card did I throw?”

“I don’t know.”

“I threw a picture card, Mom. Do you remember when I told you that any picture card is higher than a number card? Now I’ve got my finger on my picture card, and you’ve got your finger on a number card. It’s a ten. So who wins?”

“This is terrible.”

“Think, Mom! You need to exercise your brain the same way you need to exercise your body. Use it or lose it, that’s what they say.”

“I lost it.”

“No, you haven’t. Remember how I told you that a picture card is higher than a number card? Do you remember?”

”Yes, I remember.”

“You’re trying to make me feel good.”

She laughs and says, “That’s right.”

“Okay, let’s start over. You threw a ten and I threw a Queen. So who wins?”

“You?”

“That’s right, good. Do you know what today is?”

“No, what is it?”

“It’s June 22, your birthday. Do you know how old you are?”

“I have no idea.”

“Ninety-one.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Well, that’s how old you are.”

“I’m cold.”

I get her a sweater. We sit quietly. I’m thinking that I popped out of that now-frail body when she was twenty- four. My father owned a bar in Harlem and he could open a bottle with his teeth. There’s a photo of him and my mother walking along Broadway, a theater marquis behind them advertising a movie with Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler. My mother’s wearing a dress with big polka dots and a ruff collar and the wind is pressing the dress against her. My father’s looking straight at the camera and smiling.

She’s looking up now, maybe watching some birds. Who knows what registers? She says, “It’s beautiful here.” Her main problem is walking. She needs to be helped out of a chair and up and down stairs. One of her ankles is always swollen. It’s marked with a star-shaped bruise that looks like a blue tattoo. She’s always had it. When I was a baby she was pushing me in a carriage on Twelfth Avenue when a taxi blew a tire and swerved toward us. She pushed the carriage out of the way and the cab ran over her foot. The broken ankle never healed properly.

I pick up the discards and make a show of shuffling the deck.

“Do you want to keep playing?”

“Let’s stop,” she says. “I want to sleep.”

“Anything you say, Mom. Anything you say.”

