

## POKER PARTY

Linda Pressman, Paradise Valley Community College  
Honorable Mention, Creative Non-Fiction

It's Saturday night, poker night at our house in Skokie. Our house is preferred for the weekly games since we have a kitchen table large enough to accommodate the sprawling couples. I'm standing inside the drapes at the front picture window, watching my aunts and uncles arrive. Their early 1960's sedans pull to the curb, pointy fins, big round headlights. Aunt Anna arrives in a newer Cadillac that seems to shove the other vehicles aside as Uncle Saul parks it by the curb. I leave the window, hearing the muffled sounds of car doors slamming, the sound of high heels tapping up the sidewalk. Time to disappear.

Us seven, the daughters of Manny and Myrna, scatter, not only because mom told us to, but also to avoid the aunts' usual running inventory. Who's ugly, who's pretty; who's fat, who's skinny; who's smart and who's dumb. Even we understand the Yiddish of their compliments and criticisms. Through an apparent accident of birth I am rated satisfactory, but I cringe as they label one of my sisters the worst of all three: ugly, fat and dumb. We wouldn't want to come to the poker party anyway. We're American-born bigots, who despise Yiddish and wish they'll all just learn English anyway. And we don't get the jokes.

They crowd into our entryway, taking up too much room. The house is sparkling; the living room a showcase with its plastic-wrapped couches, marble tables, big gold lamps with barrel shades. And Anna's living room is roped off, leaving only a plastic path to walk on as you observe through the velvet ropes the still life of her 1960's living room, but my mom believes in actually entering the room and sticking to the couches.

The coat closet is already full with our seven winter coats, our mittens on a string, our boots, snowsuits, and a box of shoes of mixed sizes and seasons in the bottom. My mother drapes their coats, hats and scarves over her arm and carries them upstairs to her bedroom where they form a huge pile on the bed, the aunts following carrying their purses. They're all talking at once: about the ride over, who's watching the kids, the weather. They save the good topics for later. Aunt Anna keeps her coat on; it's mink after all. The others ooh and aah over it, exclaiming over the softness of the fur and how much it cost, which Anna is happy to disclose. Later my little sister and I will burrow under the coats, finding old butterscotch candies and tissues in the pockets, and smelling on them the scent of fall in Chicago.

My mom gives them a tour of the upstairs bedrooms, which have just been carpeted, over the original oak flooring. White for her room, blue for the older girls and red for the younger. Patriotic by accident. They stop for a moment to admire each room, noting the older girls' room with its two single beds and one fold out couch, and the younger girls' room with one trundle bed and one bunk bed. Amazing how she fits all those girls in this house. They stop briefly in the upstairs bathroom to admire the chandelier my mom has installed, gilt and crystal, our fifth chandelier in the house and second in a bathroom. The aunts hum with approval at this sign of American affluence, mom leaving her greenhorn status firmly behind.

The ladies are all wearing stiff 1960's dresses, brocade with embossed flower patterns. They have pointy brassiered chest, garter-belt stockings legs, and eighteen-hour girdled hips. Their hair stands up on top of their heads, all air, teased into beautiful swirls and waves, set at the beauty salon and then stringently maintained. Mom's Ash Blonde, Anna's Chestnut Brown, Mina's Rouge Brown and Ida's Black. They never wash their own hair.

The men at the poker party, my father and uncles, are rough immigrants; holocaust survivors. Three own laundries, one a gas station. They have heavy accents yet speak five languages. Scorned for their laundries in the south side of Chicago and the smell of gasoline on their hands, they are amazed at how far they have come. From shacks in Eastern Europe and concentration camps to the suburbs, American kids and safety. They don't wear ties to this party, rather pants with short-sleeved button-down shirts. The smell of aftershave fills the air, Old Spice, Mennen, Brut.

They arrange themselves around our round wood-look laminate table, couples together so that there is a cacophony of sound as the men carry on one conversation, about the economy, politics and their businesses, while the women carry on another, about their homes, their kids and their neighbors. The black Naughahyde swivel chairs creak and groan with their movements. Ashtrays are placed strategically before each of the men along with shot glasses, which, in the morning, will double as egg cups. Packs of cards, a bottle of schnapps, some Canadian Club whiskey, cigars and cigarettes are strewn around the table. Borscht, Schav, herring and dark rye bread make up the menu for this evening. Mom has brought out her good drinking glasses, not the used Yahrzeit candle glasses we use every day.

Smoke billows through our kitchen; coffee cake is resisted then consumed by ladies forever dieting. Beer for the men, wine for the women. They get louder and louder as the night goes on. This one's from Poland, this one's from Lithuania, the one's from the Ukraine. Their Yiddish dialectic variations cause endless hilarity since, apparently, what might mean "pen" which pronounced one-way means "penis" when pronounced another.

They switch from poker to kalookie and the volume in the kitchen increases. Aunt Mina raises the bets from a nickel to a quarter as Aunt Anna complains loudly. I hear the Yiddish exclamations:

"Oy Anumnick!"

"Oy Gavult!"

"Oy Vay es mere!"

The sounds float down the stairway to us seven, sunk in our favorite chairs and on the couch in the family room watching an old W.C. Fields movie. Since dad allows his customers to trade in kind to have their laundry done, we have ten black and white T.V. sets marching across the linoleum floor, like a museum of T.V. history. We're watching the only one that works. The horizontal setting is stuck and W.C.'s head is at the bottom of the screen and his torso is at the top. We're just happy we got the picture to stand still.

We're all hungry so I'm sent on a food-gathering mission. I sneak into the dark side of the kitchen futilely looking for snack foods in a house filled with chickens, egg noodles, fish and matzo meal, when my mother catches me.

"Linda, mameleh, come kiss everyone goodnight!" she calls out.

Her words fill me with dread. Now I've done it. Now I have to circle the table saying goodnight to them all as the lone representative of the seven daughters. I approach my aunts' furry rouged faces and hard crunchy hair and kiss them as their hands rise to pinch my cheeks. My Aunt Mina declares me the prettiest, the smartest, the thinnest of the girls; she only has boys and would like to take me home. My Aunt Anna criticizes my hair and my posture; my ears fill with her whiny accented voice. Aunt Ida looks at me with sad brown eyes, perhaps seeing the resemblance between my face and those of missing relatives. I swoop past mom's pink lips smacking into the air.

I approach Uncle Bernie's scratchy day-old bearded face as he laments that my dad, his brother, never had a son. Uncle Saul quizzes me about the names of state capitols, not that he knows them, as I approach. His eyeglasses fogged up, Uncle Mill kisses me cheerfully, not quite sure which one of the seven girls I am. Dad's face is beet red as I approach, hitting the schnapps a little too hard.

Back downstairs my older sisters go to bed, creeping up the staircases silently, doing their best to avoid detection. My little sister and I stay awake lying on the fold out sofa bed watching the end of the flickering movie. Finally we turn off the T.V. set, watching the picture shrink down to a tiny bright dot in the center of the screen that we stare at till it disappears. The party starts breaking up, the boisterous noise quiets down. We hear footsteps unsteadily climbing the stairs to get the coats, the hats, the purses. Then their goodbyes and "Zei Gesunt." Go in health.

Tomorrow my mother will rehash the party endlessly on the phone, talking to Anna about Mina and Ida, to Ida about Mina and Anna, and to Mina about Anna and Ida. They fight, they make up, they talk about each other's children, argue about whose daughters are pretty and whose are not, model their weight losses and new clothes to each other. They compete in the decorating of their homes and take pride in the wall-to-wall carpeting, their gilt wallpaper, and the number of television sets they own. Thrown together as adults due to marriages made by siblings, they are close to each other, yet watchful. Loving, yet rivals. They are sisters-in-law, never sisters.

