

TO SHOOT THE MOON

Kimberly Giunta

Phoenix College

Third Place, Essay

I DO NOT KNOW WHY pinochle is dead, but I miss it. People of this generation just don't play social card games like pinochle or bridge much anymore. Maybe card games are old-fashioned and boring in our high-speed, www.instant-access world. Maybe the rules according to Hoyle are too intricate, too memory-intensive, or score keeping by hand too complicated. Or, possibly, people just cannot be bothered to come together any longer.

I learned to play pinochle at my Grandma Mildred's knee when I was six. Grandma taught me the counter-intuitive hierarchy of pinochle, how to bid, what meld was, and the value of trump. After the bid in pinochle, players must meld, show much of their hand, for an initial score. As I got older, instead of grilling me on the meld values of runs, marriages, and families, Grandma traded gossip about relatives for news about my own social life.

Grandma was happy when I finally married Mark. Although he rarely visited her, Grandma had liked Mark ever since she learned that he used to bring me groceries when I was broke. Grandma was the youngest girl of nine children and, for years, she had shared a pair of shoes with two of her older sisters. Grandma was a woman who thought that romance was fine, but a man who brought groceries was something special.

Meld is followed by the second method of gaining points, the play itself, which measures how well players can capitalize on what they are dealt. Grandma taught me about power plays, how to disguise what you were seeking from the other players, and how to think ahead to the end of the game. She taught me that, when playing on a team, you might have to pass the best cards to your partner even if you just get garbage back.

Often, perhaps surprisingly, the queen was the key to meld and points. The queen was the cohesive; without the queen there could be no marriages, no families. And the queen could be sneaky in play, low enough to not be threatening but high enough to win a hand if held for the right moment.

In 1997, during that amorphous time between Halloween and Thanksgiving, the proclamation had come down that my Grandma wanted her entire family up north for Christmas. Although Grandma had insisted, I was resistant. My life was crazy. Her house was a five-hour drive. I doubted my husband would want to go. There were so many reasons to decline.

I arrived a couple of days early. The house was bustling with family. Grandma had managed, by hook or by crook and by trading in favors, to get everyone in hand. For the first time in over eight years, all three of my grandmother's children and their spouses were together for the holiday. Grandma's silver hair had been freshly permed and she hugged everyone repeatedly. Of course, Grandma's seventy-seven-year-old boyfriend, Bud, was there too. They were a happy old pair.

Grandma liked to say, her eyes twinkling devilishly, that they were living in sin. A devout Catholic, she took pleasure only in the small sins.

My husband, Mark, was convinced to drive up to join me before Christmas Eve dinner. Stomping into Grandma's house together, we were greeted like returning royalty. I remember bursting through the door, our coats sprinkled with the freshly fallen snow. The Christmas tree was brightly lit and hung with old-fashioned bulbs. The smell of turkey and sage was in the air. My nieces squealed in the back bedroom.

Grandma was there to meet Mark and I at the door, to welcome one more into her flock. Grandma kissed me, leaving a red heart-shaped tattoo of lipstick on my cheek. She probably kissed all of us. I know that she kissed my husband and that the kiss surprised him. Grandma told Mark how glad she was that he had made it. Our family was complete.

Soon, we sat for dinner. The table was overflowing with three generations and a ton of food. Candlelight twinkled like diamonds. Two card tables had been set up for the littlest ones. To her left, Grandma grabbed her daughter's hand, to the right her son's—my father's. The signal given, we all joined hands. My father said the prayer. We always said a prayer when eating with Grandma, even those of us who never prayed at any other time. Dad thanked the Lord for the good food, the family being together, for our health and all of our many blessings.

"Amen."

Her efforts having come to fruition, Grandma was content. She beamed at each of us in turn. Napkins were placed on laps. Food was passed. Knives and forks scraped against plates. Then, without a sound, Grandma slumped to her left. That was all; she was gone. The Christmas tree lights were soon overshadowed by ambulance lights. The hospital said she had a massive heart attack.

Grandma's death came as a surprise, in part, because she had not been ill. We had played pinochle, she and I, just the night before. Grandma had been sharp as a tack and had beaten me, four games to one. The truth is, I only won that last game because I threw caution to the wind and declared I was going to shoot the moon. To "shoot the moon" in pinochle parlance means you must take every trick, make every point, or lose. One does not shoot the moon recklessly, it is a calculated risk. The challenge thrown, Grandma had buckled down. Her eyes had measured me from behind her purple-rimmed bifocals. After eighty years, she knew not to fight for every point. Her game was the waiting game. When I had captured the last hand, Grandma laughed out loud, delighted at my success. Grandma should be delighted, she had taught me how to shoot the moon.

I spoke at my grandmother's funeral. I said how loved she was, how much she had passed on to me, and how she had unfailingly sacrificed for her family over the years. I did not say that I had a feeling that she had orchestrated this moment, somehow bringing all of us together one last time before throwing in her hand. But I thought it, and I was comforted by the presence of my husband, my family coming together. Grandma had done it, she had shot the moon.