

What Our Fathers Knew

by Alan Stewart Carl

The clickity-click of poker chips spills out to the six of us waiting for a table. We're old college buddies, drunk since one this afternoon, sporting the ball caps our wives never let us wear. We brag. About our poker wins, how easy it is to read each other, how we can figure the odds. Even as we worry—deep below the alcohol and overloud laughter, we worry—the other men are better players. And luckier too.

We sit together and joke we could've stayed home, played in one of our garages. Except we never play cards at home, too busy with wives and kids and lacking that chauvinistic will our fathers had on the front porches of our youth, drinking Lone Star as our mothers cooked and cleaned and tucked us into bed. We've pledged to be different sort of men—we kiss boo-boos, we read Dr. Seuss. We say things like clickity-click.

The cards fall well for some and not so well for others. We order drinks. We rib one another about our heavy bellies and fattening wives. We show off our chip tricks: spin one down the knuckles, slide two stacks of eight into one of sixteen. Hours pass. Some lose a lot; others double up, triple up. The winners laugh, knowing success is owed to them—with their wives so unwilling and their children so difficult to raise. The losers stiffen, knowing that failure is part of the pattern—why their wives are so unwilling and their children are so difficult to raise.

The winners want to go out for steak. The losers want the hotel buffet. We settle on a chain restaurant we can find back home. The winners have their steak overdone. The losers have sandwiches, still too pricey. No one can stop talking about poker. We lecture each other about our bad plays. We brush off attempts to talk about college and women. A few stop talking all together. We wipe our mouths and wonder why we even came, why we believed we all still shared something real.

We return to the tables. The cards fall. Our chips tricks fail. We think about our wives, our children, think about our fathers: they would have known how to make a loser laugh, how to get a winner to pay. We can change diapers and snuggle on couches, but we never learned how to stand on the porch, drinking beer, unfazed by each other's struggles, knowing what we share can't be taken away by fortune, good or bad. Our fathers understood things we've never known. Or so we think. Or so we hope, as the chips go clickity-click and no one now is speaking.

