

## To Build a House of Cards

The deck is buried deep inside a drawer, slumbering beneath a bed of crumpled papers slathered in dates long overdue. A small, unsteady hand reaches blindly inside, swishing the sheets until slim fingers wrap around the box. The child brings the deck of cards to his lips and murmurs a soft apology. He was always told to apologise if he did something wrong, and that everything would be alright if he did. Somewhere down the line, he forgot the central piece of that advice. He would just keep saying sorry while Mama and Papa screamed at each other for a reason he couldn't decipher. Maybe they just never heard him. He hates yelling.

The cardboard box is covered in a thin film of dust. Interwoven reds and whites enshroud the cards in a tablecloth pattern. The deck could host a luncheon for a family of beetles, platters piled high with tiny towers of miniature doughnuts. Sweet and scrumptious. Just like the time Mama took the child to the bakery and let him get any flavour he wanted. He let her have a piece, drooling even as the morsel met lips that weren't his.

A scrap of the same tablecloth is also on Papa's matchbox. He burned his thumb once while striking a match and started sucking on it like a baby. Mama couldn't suffocate her giggle in time. Papa struck her like the match. The child said he was sorry.

The door to the child's room closes behind him as he sits on the ragged carpet. He and Mama used to play like this all the time. The cards fill the vacancy of her company, spilling out of the pack and scattering across the floor. Mama frowns whenever she sees a messy room, but it's been a long time since she last came in to check. She's always frowning anyway.

Gathering the cards, the child counts them one by one. Fifty-two in all, plus the two Jokers. One is radiant with vibrant colour, dancing merrily with jingling bells and a silly smirk, bringing laughter and joy to the King, the Queen, and the Jack. The child imagines wearing the same flamboyant hat, twirling through his family's palace, entertaining everyone with jokes and songs. All eyes on him. Indelible warmth.

He sets the other Joker aside, the one in black and white. The one who grins widely to obscure his grayscale heart.

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The first two cards are always the hardest to place. The moment one starts to lose faith, the other crumbles along with it. It's easy to forget just how much two cards can support each other. The child places the King and the Queen together, the two pillars who keep the walls intact and hold the roof over everyone's heads.

They aren't alone for long. First arrives the Jack, nestled close and dear. The Jack is a quiet card who tends to keep to himself. His bedroom is a haven protecting him from the

battering storm of the outside world. Whenever the Jack shuts himself away, the Joker has trouble standing on his own, the joyful Joker clothed in colour who leans on the Jack for support. The lonely Jack never seems to realise just how much the house needs him to endure. Three cards can't build a home. There will always be one left behind.

If the child had stronger cards, maybe the house would stay standing even if the King and Queen occasionally yelled at each other, or if the Jack decided that he wanted some alone time. Maybe the Joker wouldn't crumple under the weight of the roof on his small shoulders, or collect dust underneath a stack of forgotten papers. The child bends each card, one after the other, trying to see how much strain they can take before they break. He stops just before the Joker snaps in two. The other three don't bend so easily.

A scream and a loud thud shake the walls, almost causing the foundations of the card house to collapse. Mama and Papa will turn into infants soon. One wailing incessantly in the corner, the other sucking from his baby bottle. The child feebly wraps his arms around the four trembling cards on the floor, as if his spine were a turtle's shell that could deflect the stifled voices penetrating the thin door. If only it could shelter his ears as well, offer refuge for his stinging eyes. Even the slightest exhale will cause the tiny house of cards to collapse.

The clamour ceases, and the cards somehow still stand. The child switches out the colourful Joker for the one in black and white.

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A memory. Blueprints etched in the echoes of the child's mind, preserved in a gilded frame of days long past. Papa gave him the gift of this recollection, back when he used to smile.

He sat the child down at the kitchen table, leaving him in questioning suspense. Mama was on the couch reading a book, her eyes flicking between the pages and the twirling feet of the child in a chair far too tall for him. A smile flashed in her gaze, her lips concealed behind the novel cover.

Papa sat across from the child and pulled out a deck of cards, the same ornate patterning plastered on either side. Spreading the cards face-up across the table, he picked out a King and a Queen and placed them together, like two lovers nuzzling their foreheads against each other. Next to them, he placed two Jacks, giving joy to the King and Queen, supporting one another. The child asked to swap out one of the Jacks for a Joker. Surely the other cards would want someone who could make them laugh and smile, just as Mama and Papa did as they watched the child mirthfully struggle to balance the cards on the table. A pleasant warbling to herald the rising morning sun.

It continued rising as Papa and the child kept expanding the house with cards. The child would hold his breath, turning away to expel a tightly kept splutter before heaving in another gulp of air. Papa promised that he wouldn't let the house fall. It was alright. The child could breathe. His hands trembled giddily, and he decided to stop building, trusting Papa with the rest. Card after card, level after level, Papa's tongue poking out of the gap between his teeth. The book was closed on Mama's lap, but she didn't move from her spot on the couch. Not a muscle, not a hair. Once the house was complete, it could never be torn down.

The cards began to form a beautiful shape, like the crystalline profile of a snowflake whose icy tendrils slither along droplets of crisp air, binding them together as they reflect gleams of sparkling light. Not long ago there was nothing on this table, an empty plot of land waiting for a family to create their home. Only two cards left, the final pair of jewels atop an intricate crown. A reverse crane game, a delicate operation to place the prize in just the right spot. A slight quiver in Papa's arm as he lowered the cards, gently placing them before departing like a goodnight kiss. The house swayed, but it didn't fall.

For a while, Papa even kept his promise, never once letting the house collapse. Until that night, when he shredded a piece of paper from an envelope and slammed his fists against the kitchen wall. The impact caused the cards to dissolve into dust.

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The child tries to explain to his friends that it will look more like a house when it's finished. Two layers aren't nearly enough to reveal the potential of these little rectangles, the endless possibilities for what they might become. Even the child was doubtful when he first saw those cards spread across the kitchen table, but he knows that his friends will understand when he places those last two cards on top. Papa was always a lot better at making things, though. He's also a lot better at breaking things.

The child's friends call him a liar. What pile of playing cards could shelter a family, keep them warm and dry? The child looks up. Water drips from a damp crack in the ceiling, caught by a bucket on the floor near the corner of the room. Each drop resounds with a metallic clack, like an old clock with rusted gears. It's a cold, lifeless sound.

Frowning like Papa does whenever his baby bottle runs low, the child takes two cards and places them at the start of the third row. His clammy hands let go, and the cards slip and fall. The rest become dominoes, toppling over one after the other until the child is left with a big pile of emptiness, just like how he began. All his friends start laughing, pointing at the crimson card splatter soaking the carpet. This isn't the sort of laughter the child wants to hear. His eyes start throbbing with moisture. Papa and Mama don't agree on things anymore, but they both hate it when the child cries. They scream and flail their arms and contort their faces into grotesque nightmares, which only makes more tears spill out, which only makes them louder.

A house isn't supposed to be this fragile. The one Papa built back then was so strong, and he used the exact same cards. All the child wants is to make a house like before.

Yet no matter how strong it was, even that one fell apart in the end.

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The cards are flimsier than ever, struggling to hold their burdens, as if a single shout will crush them into balls of paper at any moment. They're so close together, only a thin, hollow wall between them, but they pretend like they're all alone, slowly turning their charade into a reality as each day passes. They could help each other. They could do so much. Instead, the black-and-white Joker is left to support the entire roof by himself.

The child rebuilds his house of cards around the solitary Joker, not the King and Queen. Card upon card, creating little hands of prayer intertwined as they reach towards some far-off salvation beyond the clouds. One layer, another layer, inching ever closer to the way it used to be. The Joker is the only card strong enough to hold the house together. How much more can it take before it shatters into tiny pieces?

The house from back then was perfect. It never should have changed.

A sign is taped to the other side of the child's bedroom door, barring anyone else from entering. Red-faced fists have a bad habit of causing houses to collapse. Too much progress has been made to risk anyone else ruin it. The child doesn't talk to his friends anymore.

Just as the third level is finished, Papa bursts into the room slobbering madly like a bull beneath the lash. The hand-drawn sign flutters to the ground, dislodged from the violated door. The child puts on his shell and huddles over the cards, trembling, closing his eyes, wincing from the slightest shift in airflow. Razor talons dig into his flesh and yank him away, tossing him haphazardly into the wall. He hits his head. A yelp slips off his tongue. He stifles his mouth with his hands. It's too late. Papa heard it. Taking a massive glug from his baby bottle, Papa kicks down the house of cards and stomps on the debris, snarling, careening towards the shivering child who tries to meld his flesh into the wall.

Before Papa can get within arms-length, Mama yells something from the hallway outside. Papa screams back so loudly that the child can't hear what he's saying. Tears scratch at the child's eyes, and he covers his face so that Papa won't see. The poor, dismembered house of cards, wailing in agony beneath Papa's feet. Gargling, shouting, stomping, slamming.

A different voice seeps through the walls, sadder and shakier. It's Brother.

Papa's footsteps grow distant, their tremors subsiding. The door slams behind him, saving the child the trouble. Viciously rubbing his eyes clear, the child crawls towards the heap of rubble and picks up the two cards bent irreparably out of shape by Papa's tantrum.

They have no place in the child's house anymore.

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Rebuilding is a much smoother process now. Do it enough times, and one starts to get the hang of it. The hardest part is deciding that it's time to try again. The load is definitely heavier, but the Joker can endure it. None of the other cards are much help. Close enough to be seen, too far away to reach.

The child has already begun on the fourth row when Mama comes into his room, not bothering to knock, ignoring the sign. The leftover cards are neatly stacked to the side, waiting patiently to be added to the house. There's no mess to make Mama mad this time.

Her mouth smiles at the child despite the sullen exhaustion in her eyes. She perches on the edge of the bed and asks the child to sit next to her, but he remains on the carpet, a cautious hand extended around the front of his house. Her voice escapes softer than a whisper. The child asks her to talk louder. She does, but the words aren't any less indecipherable. She mentions Papa's name, rupturing with shivers and sobs each time. Just the sight of her might be enough for the cards to collapse.

Mama grows silent, looking strangely past her feet. The child asks if he can go back to building his house. She shakes her head and murmurs that he'll need to tear down his house because they're moving far away.

He asks where they're moving.

She tells him anywhere that isn't here.

He asks why they're moving.

She tells him that he'll understand in a few years.

He asks when they're moving.

She tells him very soon.

He asks if Papa and Brother are coming with them.

She says no.

He tells her that he won't destroy his house of cards. She gets up and does it for him.

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Everything is a lot quieter now. Even in a cramped apartment, empty space can feel so vast. The child spares a passing thought for Brother, probably still locked in his room like always. Maybe he doesn't even know that Mama and the child have left. The child hopes that Brother can be happier with less people around to make him feel lonely.

Mama also doesn't like to stick around anymore. A note scrawled atop plates of food wrapped in cellophane each morning before the child awakes. Left to turn off the lights before curling up beneath the bedsheets, no story or lullaby or goodnight kiss to soothe his heavy eyelids. Mama said soon after they moved that she was nothing like Papa, that she would work hard to support the roof over their heads. The child asked how Mama could support anything if she was always gone, but she left through the front door before he even got the chance to open his mouth.

Still, a small part of the child is relieved. Without Mama, there's finally nobody left who can ruin his house. It's true that he had to begin all over again, but things felt different from the moment the Joker first touched the fresh, new floor. It felt right, like the child really could build a new home here. He's so close to completing it now. All that's left is the final level.

The child reaches out his hand for the last two parts, but his fingers brush the empty carpet. Looking around, he realises that he's run out of cards.

THE END