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Bent Out of Shape

As far back as I can remember, my family was always playing cards: just the four of us, with visiting family, or family friends. Now I realize the lasting bonds and memories such games created, and I miss spending that time with my family and having fun with everyone. Although I didn't always feel that way about it.

As a teenager, I can think of better ways to spend my Sunday than sitting at home, waiting for my parents to come around, and sorting Christmas cards with my stupid brother. It's July; I want to go out and enjoy my summer, not suffer enforced quality time with the family. "Why did you grab Christmas cards in July, moron?" I ask Daniel with a sneer. He counters with a glare and says "Found them first. Alright?" Finally, our parents come out to the porch and tell us to stop fighting as they settle into their seats, arranging their coffee cups and snacks around score cards and cheat sheets. Against my best efforts, I start having fun a few minutes into the game. It's hard to stay mad when your dad pokes fun at everyone, and with mom's obvious joy at having us all together.

When some of our friends show up to see if we can go hang out, I am a bit mortified as Dad tells them to grab something to drink and join our game. While Daniel's friends move to comply, I say, "Oh, Ulli doesn't know how to play progressive rummy, Dad. Isn't that right?" Looking to my friend, I see her grinning "I'd love to learn." Groaning I sit back down and kick out

a chair for her. What followed was a lesson in humility and the realization that, maybe, I was one of those lucky kids with cool parents. After that my friends often came to play rummy with us, using the Christmas cards of course, and over the years I learned that how a person plays cards can teach you a lot about their personality.

Now that I am grown I fondly remember those days. I've taught my husband how to play rummy, and we carried on the tradition when we had friends over and spent some time playing cards and telling jokes. Those evenings have become rare though, as everyone is so busy with their own lives, until we have finally just stopped playing. I miss cards, especially that beaten up old Christmas deck with some of its cards torn or bent from being handled too roughly. I wonder how I can get my kids involved in a game with us without creating a tantrum because I am tearing them away from the Xbox or whatever it is they are doing at the moment. All any parent can do is try, but sometimes its best when it was their own idea.

It rained quite a bit while we were visiting my parents in Germany for summer vacation. One afternoon, after watching my daughter stomp off in a fit because she couldn't go out and play with her friends, I curled up with a good book out on the porch. I heard Jillian join my son, who was in the office talking to his Nana and digging through her cabinets. A little while later, my daughter brought out a battered old deck of cards, asking if we could play something. Here was the opportunity I'd been waiting for, so telling the Starks to wait for my return I set aside my book and got ready to teach one of my favorite childhood pastimes to my little girl. "Those are our old rummy cards," I tell her "and this is a great time for you to learn how to play." We sat down and started sorting out cards to make sure they are all there, as my parents always made us do whenever we were getting ready to play.

Games are a great way to bring people together; that's how it has always been for us. Halfway through sorting the cards Jillian holds one up, "Hey Mama, this one doesn't go." Seeing the card with the bright orange Lufthansa Logo on the back I smile and explain that this deck is supposed to be a double deck of cards, but over the years some got lost or too torn, so my brother and I salvaged cards from other incomplete decks. She returns with "Why not throw them away and get a new one?"

"Well, we really loved these Christmas cards, so we tried to make sure we could play with them as long as possible." I reply. Looking at me doubtfully, she continued sorting.

Right then my father came walking out and in one glance took in what we were up to, smiling he said "You start explaining the rules to Squirrel Bait, I'll go get Mom and we can all play."

We then spent that afternoon, as I had been longing to, playing with the kids and laughing so much that some of us had tears in our eyes. I enjoyed the grins on my parents' faces, as they told the kids all sorts of stories. The little ones scoffing, at the thought of their mother and uncle as children, didn't seem to want the game to end. I even learned new things about my family, when my father mentioned, off handedly, how meeting my Opa had intimidated him because my mom had told him her father was a bookie. There I am, a grown woman and a mother myself, and my parents still teach me that I don't know everything.

After some ice cream that evening, Jillian turned to me and said, "Mama, those Christmas cards are all old and beat up, but I see why you and Uncle Daniel like them so much." Grinning and my heart filled to bursting, I hugged her and asked, "Even if they are all bent out of shape?"