

SOLITAIRE

I would watch Alida play solitaire. And I would make up my own game. She was threading together the great pattern of the universe. She was giving me her everything

How did all these lines intersect and reveal a greater pattern? There was the proximity of card to card. The number and the suit. There had to be another mystery. What held all these forces in place? What prevented the chaos from sending the universe in every which direction. Alida was explaining how the chapters were connected together. This was more than the direction of any single story. This was what made it all turn.

“It is in the cards.”

I needed to contemplate that puzzle. Could I solve the mystery with one deck? I needed to describe how that thread held it all in place.

I reviewed the paths of fame, fortune, and happiness. What was the key? Where was the enlightenment?

I thought about the dead man's hand. It was too good for his opponents. It made him think his adversary was cheating. It upset the game in the middle and brought it to a quick end. He shot the alleged cheater.

“I was sure that he was cheating me. His luck was just too good.”

The cards can give you good luck. And they can also bring you bad.

The cards presented a long line from one to fifty-two that continued to repeat in time. These were the weeks of the year. Alida followed this progression.

“I have to take my walk.”

And she would walk around the neighborhood. She was nearing her destination. It was the half-way point. She would turn around and head home. These lines extended everywhere. They were the stuff of life. These twisted lines said it all. The card shark needed to let it be. He could have followed that straight line home. You can't trick time. You can't force the game.

Alida sat with her cards. She was mapping her movement for the day, her long walk. She went through all the cards. Then she shuffled them. And she shuffled them again. This was chance. The random element. The alternative order. What had she figured out?

There was this first crossing where all the lines came together. This was knowledge. This was creation. This would never take you all the way. It wouldn't undo the chaos. That disorder was much deeper. The cards were ordered. They were also in suits. Here the luck was distributed. Matching cards. The higher numbers. Four kings. Luck resisted this strict order. But it made so much sense.

“I need four kings.”

“Two kings and three queens.”

“The house is full. What does the dead man have?”

“I can beat your hand.”

“How are you going to do that?”

Alida shuffled the cards again. She was not going to play to a dead man.

The game went much quicker today. Alida saw the order. The cards had been broken up and recomposed in a new order. She saw that order. She sped through the cards and put them in order of the game.

She did all this so that she could play again.

“The house wins.”

“The house never wins. I just keep playing.”

This first order was all about good health . Alida needed her strength. She worked to get back to that feeling of exuberance.

“Even if this is temporary, this will do.”

She took her card and played it.

The game entered the next order. This was time and memory. Things were lost.

“I need to find the key to that briefcase.”

What was in there? Photographs. Memories.

“Who are those people?”

“Friends, relatives.”

She explained what she was seeing. She was shuffling her memories.

“Now, I see this. What am I missing?”

She wanted another key. This was a key which existed in her mind. It was just outside her grasp.

“If the future is like the past, the cards should be able to predict what will happen.”

Many a fortune had been squandered on this belief.

“I had an uncle who went panning for gold. I never heard of him again.”

He was now an emperor surrounded by gold idols.

“Here is your next card.”

In this order, the self was mastered.

Alida ate some grapes. She felt refreshed. She needed strength. She wanted to stay alert. Some days, it was no so easy. The chill would overcome her. She would feel the ache in her bones. She would rest a little longer in bed. Or she would remain in her room doing crosswords and watching television.

I knew not to count her out. It was a nasty rainy day. Alida seemed mad at the world. She gritted her teeth. She was not prepared for what was happening. She had plans. She did not want to get stuck in the house. This was hardly the weather to support her wishes.

She reached deep into herself. Her venom turned into an energy. And it spread out. The power affected the day. The rain seemed to dissipate. She felt more than confident. The sun started to peek through. She went for her walk. The day had given over to Alida's will. This was very overpowering for her.

She made it back before the rain struck again. Her magic worked for as long as it could. The day had another logic. Knowing yourself meant to challenge the day. She had no idea of what she was capable. Sometimes it was simply a matter of convincing herself. Then she would come up against the refusal of time. She could not get around it. This was the order of prayer and forgiveness.

The order of the cards could be completely transposed. The end was the beginning. The world turned on itself. Forgiveness was not the same thing as forgetting. Forgiveness required an effort. It related to something important. To forgive truly required a deep effort on the part of the self. She had to commit herself to submit to a higher power. She was learning these wondrous powers that existed outside or herself. If she could affect these forces, anything could

come her way. She would wish healing for others. She invited them to see strengths within themselves.

She recognized the energies which were distributed in the universe. This was her science. She could sense the immediacy in her environment. She recognized how these power got transmitted deeper in space. She understood tricks of the body. How the spirit could interact with the physical world. These were the special mysterious powers which appeared when they were least expected.

Ultimately, she was one of the magical sorts. She took nothing for granted. She would be at the end of her resources and persevere. She could prime this deep well.

She would constantly surprise herself. That did not diminish her fundamental confidence. When she needed to, she could find that powerful glue. She didn't need every skill in the world. She only needed some grace to appear and guide her through the darkness.

In the final order, she encountered total bewilderment. Nothing would hold in place. It wasn't a matter of discarding the rejected products. There would be nothing that would fall into place. She did what she could until it became clear that there would be no rescue. She would just have to close the door on the day. The cards were revealing the deeper realm. The rock hard fabric of matter could not so easily be counteracted. This was deep wisdom about the cards. Alida simply watched this realm state its case. She could not counteract its impression. She only had to hope that there was something greater in the world which could circumvent these dark powers.

She did not even try to understand what made the evil propagate. It was simply not part of her world. The cards would still brew up these nasty contradictions. You could not disentangle these knots by rearranging the cards. Once this severe proposition made its way known, nothing could interrupt its logic.

The cards were worn to reflect Alida's frustrations. She was clinging herself to these forces affecting her again. In her own way, her cards were marked. And her opponent emerged from the movement of the cards on the table. This was not just solitaire. It was another kind of game. The devil in the details had a special meaning. Alida would play the cards quickly as if she saw an opening. Even as the cards would seem to resist, she would discover what she needed to do. She was getting to know her challenger. She was realizing something deep about this stranger. This was an understanding which she seldom liked to admit.

I need to work on my health. This is something I know how to control. Her life was a canvas. She would add more red and less blues.

"I need to work on my breathing."

She would pace her breaths. She was reaching a sure plateau. Here, her efforts could taper off.

"I am getting ready to function."

She had her own advice for me.

"In the rush to change the world, do not lose hope!"

What did she mean by that? The rush to change the world was based on a hope.

"You need to take things gradually. Sometimes, you will be caught in the storm. But you cannot force it."

She had seen something disturbing happening in her world. Freedom seemed rare. But

Allida was afraid to ask her heroes where they had gone wrong. One time, Alida had accompanied me to DeKalb County Court. There were loads of young men being led away for good. She held back the tears. There was something not right here.

“We give them fair trials here.”

“It may not be a fair life.”

Too many young men.

A mother was reaching out. She did not want him to go. He was hardly evil. He was caught among a vicious trade.

I worked Alida back to the car. It was all the more traumatic. They needed some lucky breaks. Better cards.

“You are playing all twos and threes. We are getting caught up in a bad place.

“It will never change.”

There wasn't much patience around here.

Alida was becoming distraught. How could others be so blind?

The train at night had its own message. A different power drove through the city as if it was the only thing that mattered. It ignored the pitter patter of the city.. The train had a clear destination

What did the solitary prisoner realize with his cards? There were men who had been in for a long time. They had been broken. They had their defenses. The birds, the flowers, the books.

Many were truly innocent. Others had been thrown away a long time ago.

What made men desperate? They realized that they would have to go for broke.

“They need to use their cards to get an edge. But they are playing from behind.”

Alida knew this story all too well. She had read it. She knew the characters. Something had to go wrong.

“In prison, they worked out the angles. It was not meant to work. But they got anxious.”

You didn't have the cards, and you overbet the hand.

There was the fast talker who thought that he had the game down. And there were his gang. They needed a direction, They couldn't wait for another day.”

This was a famous movie. They were going to rob a race track casino.

“We have an inside man. We can do this.”

The inside man did not realize that he was a set up. He had been given the wrong information. He had been used from the beginning.

“In another story, he would have gotten away with it. I was on his tail from the beginning.”

Indeed, the boss was on top of everything. He liked his simple life. And he resented someone else getting one over on him.

“You should have realized in the big house that this was not going to work out.”

“How was I supposed to do that?”

“It was too good to be true. You needed to test the inside man.”

“I am testing him now.”

“They have us boxed in. He's not going to show us a way out.”

“He got us in here.”

“That was the point. He always knew how to play the part.”

It would end up in a real catastrophe. Guns firing everywhere. The gang had no idea what had happened. They did not have the cards

You could play your cards and let the world run by around you. But it did not run on by. It picked up its pace and did its own thing. You woke up one day and you were a prisoner in a mansion in Argentina. And your husband was involved with some no-good types.

This was another well-known film.

“These are people who want to run the world in their own way. They will stop at nothing to deny us our freedoms.”

This was going deep. Even the American Embassy seemed to be involved.

“There has to be someone who is going to help me.”

“You can't keep changing your story to suit your whims. Who is this guy who has you as a prisoner?”

Your one friend hardly believed you. He saw you come and go at the grocery store.

“If you want to leave, you can just walk out.”

“They are watching me. They will bring me back.”

His agents were everywhere.

“These are friends.”

“Sure, they are!”

Her husband couldn't take any more chances. He had to make sure that she stayed home for good.

“I think he put something in my tea.”

The cup dropped to the rug. Time seemed to stop. Who was going to help?

She could hear them making plans. It was getting worse. She was helpless to move. All that she could do was blink. She need a miracle.

Alida could turn quite a few cards while watching a movie like this.

Velda's chatty friend had muscled himself in the house.

“She told me to come by.”

He worked himself by the butler.

“Get her some coffee.”

“She fell asleep while drinking tea.”

“You don't fall asleep drinking tea. Do you, mate?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Here's her cup. There's barely a drop in here. Velda, you need to get up.”

“Ollie, I didn't invite you.”

“You should be glad that I'm here. You need to keep walking.”

The butler became upset when the doctor showed up.

“Who called the doctor?”

“Sir, that is what I want to know.”

“What are you doing here, Oliver.”

“Your wife invited me.”

“Ernesto, I did not.”

“Velda, you are a little giddy. You want me here.”

“Let me look at Velda.”

“Who called the doctor?”

“Who called you here?”

“You’re not going to tell the doctor to go home now.”

“I have to examine your wife. She is not looking good.”

The doctor turned the tables on the plot to poison Velda. Oliver was able to get her out of Argentina.

The next film is a variation of the first.

There is a man who is being held in Argentina. His fortune is about to be confiscated by the American government.

“I need you to deposit this check for half a million.”

“That does not seem to be such a big deal.”

A few days later, his friend asks, “My friend is going to need lawyer in the States. Could you wire him seventy-five thousand.”

That is how the game of friendship works.

Chris and Jeremy had become great friends. Chris sought Jeremy to help him land some real estate.

“Chris, you’re a great friend. We haven’t known each other that long. But I feel as if we’re family.”

After dinner Jeremy became even more hospitable.

“Jeremy, you really have looked out for me. I couldn’t have made the deal without you.”

“I have to be honest. I think my sister has a thing for you. She saw your picture in *Time*.”

He opened his wallet and showed Chris a picture of his sister. Chris smiled and then went back to his after dinner drink.

“You seem to have a very lovely sister.”

“Yes, she is a charming girl. But she has not been herself of late.”

“What is it?”

“She was recently diagnosed with a quite serious disease.”

“That seems quite unfortunate. She’s not that old.”

“The whole family has taken the news quite hard. She is seeing a specialist. The best in the field.”

“That is good. The disease is treatable?”

“The FDA has still not approved the only drug that might help her. I know that one of the companies that you have been working for is doing research in Mexico.”

Jeremy hardly had to say a thing. He realized exactly what he was talking about.

“I want to help your sister. I just don’t know if I can get any of it here. I am dealing with a lot of regulations.”

“I really didn’t want to get into it with you.”

“No, I want to do what I can. I’m just not sure.”

The next day, Chris was on the phone trying to find more information about the drug.

“The trials have not been promising. I think that we are going to have to work with the chemistry before we can get it approved in the states.”

“It has got some positive results in clinics down there.”

“Only in a few cases. It initially seemed very promising.”

“I need you to get me some. I want to conduct my own tests.”

“We can do that, But there is a lot of paperwork to go through.”

“I am going to cut through that. I’m coming down there and brining it back with me.”

“You’re never going to get it through customs.”

“I’ve done this before. I can get clearance.”

In the intervening time, Chris had met Jeremy a couple of time. He seemed especially in his sister.

“She is not doing well. But she is hanging on.”

Chris was gone for a couple of days. When he came back, he was loaded up with the drug.

“I need to see your sister’s specialist. I will have him work out a program with your sister.”

Chris didn’t know the sister’s doctor. But he seem impressed by his visit. The specialist asked a lot of detailed questions. He wanted to see all he information about the trials. He was also interested in possible changes in the chemical composition of the drug.

“When we meet again, I will have the drugs for you.”

Chris thought nothing about handing the specialist.

“I hope that Caroline will feel strong enough to meet you next time that we get together.”

Chris was waiting at the restaurant the next time that he was supposed to meet Jeremy. He got a call from Jeremy telling him that he would not be able to make it.

Chris received a call from Mexico about the trials. He needed to communicate with the specialist. His calls were not returned.

That same afternoon, he received a visit from the FBI regarding the drug. They simply questioned him about the operations in Mexico.

“You know that someone would be in a lot of trouble if he tried to bring this drug in the country without following proper procedure.”

“I am a board trained specialist. I am quite aware of the procedure.”

Things were getting quite complex. Chris paid a surprise visit to the specialist. The office was empty. He met the property manager.

“Are you interested in renting the property?”

“Not really. I was interested in your previous tenant.”

“No one has been here in three months.”

Chris lost it, “Are yous crewing with me?”

“Sorry, sir.”

He was flustered. He immediately called Jeremy.

“I hear that you are in some trouble with the FBI.”

“I was trying to help out your sister.”

“I really appreciate the help. But my lawyer told me that I should see as little of you as possible. For the time being. Until you sort out this matter.”

“Sort out what matter.”

“I am not really sure. You met with the FBI.”

Chris was seething. Jeremy was washing his hand of the whole matter. What about his sister?

“Christ, don’t you know Jeremy’s sister. She has a house in the Hamptons.”

“What are you talking about? She has a rare disease.”

“Her husband is a hedge fund manager. She has a family. She is in great health.”

“What the hell?”

The FBI started to pay more visits.

“I am not going to be able to hide this.”

He detailed everything that happened.

“You are in a lot of trouble. A lot of trouble.”

“I was trying to help someone.”

“You know the law. You could lose your job.”

There was a good chance that Chris could lose his job. Another company was applying for a patent for the drug. They had taken the samples and used the Mexican research to make some necessary changes. There would be a much easier time in getting approval from the FDA.

“The only evidence that we have against you is your confession. We are going to have you sign some papers about the drug, about your role in the whole thing.”

Chris was losing his mind. He signed everything that he was given. He was sure that was that.

His lawyers contacted him a few months later.

“You signed away the rights to the drug.”

“What are you talking about?”

They showed him the papers. These were the papers that he had signed when he was with the FBI.

“We’ve checked with some agent that we know. No one from the local branch ever contacted you.”

That had been the nail in the coffin. He had really been played. He couldn’t very well turn the tide on this one. His personal ambitions had gotten the best of him. He believed that he could hang in Jeremy’s circle. He merited a high class wife. Jeremy had conned him through and through.

Chris’s company did not receive the patent for the drug which was made available to the American market. Chris was lucky that he did not get in more trouble for his actions. He could console himself that he would not face legal actions over what he had done. Jeremy had facilitated him in making a real estate deal. Fortunately, that transaction turned out to be sound. It wasn’t like Chris to let this be. But he was not a man well suited for revenge. He had to devote himself to a deeper commitment to his research. He had done himself in.

The cards were worn out. But there were many more stories to tell.

This was the deal of a lifetime. Toronto businessman, Brent Poseman, was hired to open a branch of his company in Ecuador.

Shep Bryant has done all the legwork. He had made the contacts. He has the suppliers and the clients. All that you have to do is show up at the office. This is going to be a gusher.

When Brent arrived in Quito, the office was up and running, but Shep was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is the impresario of all the action?”

“Shep hasn’t been doing well. I hear that he is seeking some special treatment.”

Shep had trained Brent from the early days. They were both super crazy when they worked in Vancouver together. It was a wonder that they ever got anything done.

“Shep taught me everything that I know about sales. He is a god.”

Brent couldn’t hang around the office. He had to go looking for Shep.

“He’s in the country.”

Shep had sought treatment in the city. But he had it pretty serious. He ended seeking help with alternative medicine.

“Some kind of shaman.”

The more that he looked, the more that he discovered that Shep was quite well known. He had quite a reputation.

“The people see him as a saint.”

Only later did he hear the full story.

“Shep was getting treatment. But he was a little daring. Something happened. He took something. Both guys did. Shep and his assistant. It was some special folk remedy. And Shep got really messed up. He didn’t take it well.”

“Another guy. I never hear about another guy.”

“Your Shep is dead. They buried him out in the wilderness. They didn’t want the wild animals to get him.”

Brent felt quite devastated. He was relying on Shep to help him with the operations.

“Here are some of Shep’s things. He had a girl named Christa back in Quito. She’s a television actress. You could bring his stuff back to her.”

Brent wanted to learn who had been with Shep when he died. Who was this other guy? He also felt a little uncomfortable going to see Christa.

“I was an old friend of Shep’s. He wanted you to have these things.”

She looked at Brent as the bearer of bad news, “These things. Why, thank you.”

Her look of disdain remained. She felt that Brent was nothing like Shep. Shep was heroic. Brent was only a trader in souls. He took the best of people and left whatever remained.

Her look said, “Just pick at the bones.”

Brent wanted more. He wanted to feel the inspiration of his friend. He wanted Christa to help rekindle his friend.

The regional director met with Brent.

“Are you going to stay?”

“What do you mean? I have a job to do.”

“What about all the stuff that you learned about Shep. You knew that he was using the company as a front.”

“How does that affect me?”

Brent did not want to believe the stories. Shep liked to party, but he would never do anything illegal.

Brent went and sulked. He got trashed. When he had really lost it, he went looking for Christa.

“Do you want me to console you? Shep was a great man. But he was a complex man. I

can't help you save the world.

Brent did want to save the world. He came to Ecuador with great idea.

"Brent, do you want to be a savior. Come with me."

The regional director took him to a town where Shep's economic development had destroyed the agricultural self-sufficiency of the region.

"This was all part of his development."

"Do you want me to hate the man. He was my friend."

Brent was feeling more in conflict. He visited a well-known church.

"The people say that there was a miracle here. The Virgin Mary brought a sick child back from death. Do you want to tell them that their miracle is a lie."

"Shep, I thought you were dead."

"The government needed to put some distance between myself and the authorities."

"You needed to work your own miracles."

"And your friend? Who was he?"

"Someone who had a bad time with the food."

"I'm not sure that you're the person who I want to believe anymore."

"We're still old buddies."

"Sure, we're buddies."

"Are you going to stay in the shadows?"

"I'm not going to follow you back to Quito."

Just like that Shep went back to the darkness.

"I saw him. He's still alive."

"What do you want me to say. You are Christ who brought him back to life."

"He's my Lazarus."

"Brent, do you want something more from me. Because no matter how hard you try, you're never going to get it."

"I've always thought of you as my friend's girl. There's nothing else to it."

"I'm glad that you're such a prince about it."

She wasn't yielding to his bold insistence.

"I really should go."

She didn't say a thing.

Shep's offenses were much more serious. The authorities were looking for him.

"He probably murdered the guy that he was with."

"That is nothing like the Shep that I know."

"He ruled his fiefdom like a warlord. Not the sort of guy who you knew."

"I guess that he wasn't."

They were using Brent to lure him in.

"We meet one more time."

"That has a fateful ring to it."

"Brent, you're the one playing in fate."

"Why did you bring her with you?"

"He didn't. I came on my own."

"Christa, you shouldn't have come. They're going to try to kill me."

“Why did you come?”

“I felt that I owed old Brent an explanation.”

“What explanation? That I was the one who turned you in?”

“Did you now?”

“I talked to them. I didn’t know that they were on my tail.”

“What else didn’t you know?”

“That you were a murderer.”

“You need to do thing to stay alive.”

“Were you working for the company?”

“That was just the beginning. I was remaking society. Things aren’t run so well down here.”

“So you were out to give them a better deal.”

“You have to stand up for what you believe.”

“Tell that to the people who you destroyed.”

“Are you going to give me the speech from the noble Canadian?”

“I was waiting for that from you.”

“We’re both the same.”

“Only you get the girl.”

“Where is she. Shep?”

“He’s getting away.”

“He doesn’t have far to run.”

“He knows this country like the back of his hand.”

“Hands have a tendency of slapping back.”

Shep got there after the shots had been fired. It looked as if Shep had been shot while running at them. Both his guns were drawn.

“His hands were spread wide but he wasn’t surrendering.

Brent offered to give Christa a ride back to town.

“I’ll walk.”

“It’s got to be a good 15 kilometers.”

“I’ve done it before. I wasn’t always a television star.”

It was a dry, hot day. As he turned around in his car, Brent drew up all the dust. He couldn’t even see her in his rear view mirror.

There were hardly any way that Brent could have played his cards to win. He just folded in the dust.