

### A Night of Mahjongg

The room looks like it does every other day. The raspberry colored lazy boy recliner rocking ever so slowly beside the treadmill. Back-and-forth-and-back-and-forth, as though dancing to music no one else can hear. The old but homey couch, having survived three moves, settles along the wall. Its orange, yellow, red, black, and brown thread detailing fights for light from under the dust and its youth, but settles into its faded and dusty retirement. Above the retired couch hangs a painting, a very coral colored painting. The painting is by some no name artist, but the color and beauty contributes a nice touch to the room. Near the window at an angle sits a reading chair. It is of a faded dark mustard yellow, darkened by time. Still, it remains the prime spot for a good afternoon read, and a great view of the backyard. On this particular evening, as the sun begins to set, they sit like still giants. Silent. Anticipating.

As the evening sun sets beyond the houses, streaks of yellow, orange, and gray blanket the carpeting, and then darkness. The world outside has gone to sleep, but in this room there is a soft glow that illuminates from a lamp overlooking a game of mahjongg. The night is still young when there is mahjongg to be played.

Two weekends a month, my mother calls up some of her Chinese friends from around the area to come over to our home to play a game of mahjongg. People are not hard to find, and it is not hard to convince people to drop what they are doing to come over for a night of mahjongg. People really can not get enough of this mahjongg. My mother is very persuasive as well.

Once the arrangements are made, my mother begins to prepare for the big night. Knowing the routine my father gives a sigh, and without question starts cleaning out the family room. My mother on the other hand gets to work on washing her good chinaware and baking Chinese delicacies and preparing the snacks. By the time the delicacies are out of the oven and cooling on the countertop, the family room is spotless, and my father is setting up the table and chairs for the big mahjongg night.

My mother uses her special blends of Chinese tea, which are exclusively used for special occasions as these. For tonight, the tea of choice is jasmine tea. The aroma is very light, very

sensual. She places the dried jasmine flowers into a dark red ceramic tea pot, and then pours in extra hot water. The steam billows up into the air releasing an ever tantalizing fragrance. Next, she takes out a round, black with flowers on the face tray. She arranges packages of snacks into piles: Good and No Good. Tonight, she selects four treats: wrapped candies, peanut squares, Chinese-style trail mix, and Chinese cookies. She strategically places these snacks into perfect fourths about the tray. The colors are vibrant and full of color. It is quite the masterpiece. My mother then takes out a large decorative plate, and places the Chinese delicacy she has spent the afternoon putting together. The delicacy is a red bean past squished between two layers (top and bottom) of a white sticky texture; not your typical cake texture. This is one of my mother's specialty desserts.

The snacks are all very unique and quite colorful. My mother says that the snacks not only can feed a hungry stomach, but can also stimulate the mind. The snacks are not put together on a whim, and are not your typical chips and soda. The way the snacks are put together and the variety of snacks used can foreshadow a player's technique and creativity in game play. My mother often times feel that the snacks make the game of mahjongg all worth it. In a game of mahjongg, everything is thoroughly thought through, even to the last crumb. Not every game out there takes snacks as seriously as the game itself.

As my mother places the final touches on her snacks, my father places the final touches on the mahjongg table. The table is a brown square table, with a leather face now faded. There are dinks and dents about the table, but it is still very useable. The table is placed out in the center of the room. Not one, but two layers of table cloth are draped over the face of the table. One cloth goes in one way and the other cloth in the opposite direction. The table clothes give the table face smoothness and some extra height upon the table. My father then clamps a dark brown desk lamp on the edge of the table, and then stretches its neck high over the center of the table. From the edge of the table snakes a chord. The chord is then attached to an extension chord, which then snakes around one side of the table toward the wall, and is then plugged into an outlet. Testing the lamp, on-off-on-off, to make sure it works; the lamp is ready. From a bag off the floor, my father takes out a blue box. Unclasping the clasp, my father opens the box to reveal four rows of ivory tiles. With a tumble and a crash, the ivory tiles spill upon unto the table. My father flips the tiles over so that only the green side is up. The tiles seem to form into a shape of a turtle. My father then takes out red, blue, and white playing chips. Sorting through them to make

sure that each of the four piles has the equal amount of each color, my father strategically places the piles in their respective corners for each player. The final component to making sure that the game runs smoothly is the wooden sticks. These wooden sticks were hand cut and hand painted. These sticks give support to the tiles when they are standing in a row before a player. A stick is placed parallel to the side of the table on all four sides. Everything is ready. With all the preparation that goes on before the game, it is no wonder all the work is worth in the end. The setup is done so strategically, it resembles the technique used in the game of mahjongg. Everything surrounding a game of mahjongg has a reason and purpose. The room now waits for a night of mahjongg.

As the sun sets, and evening turns to night, excitement can be felt in the air. The mahjongg table is all set up. The snacks are placed upon stools at two corners looking like art. As the world becomes dark with night, there is light in this home: of great anticipation and of joy. The ladies promptly arrive at 7:30, their coats vanishing from sight and shoes neatly lined in a row in the hall, and with limited chatter the ladies settle into the chairs and begin play.

The game begins with a grand shuffle of the tiles. The sound is very unique, similar to that of a light rain storm; quiet yet very articulate. “Mahjongg is a tile game of Chinese origin that reached the West on the 1920s. Its name means ‘the sparrows.’ Each of four players plays for himself. Players collect sets of tiles with the object of completing their hands in a prescribed manner (Diagram Group, 70).” After the tiles have been well shuffled, the green and white tiles which resemble miniature cakes, “each player then draws 36 tiles at random (of the 136) and builds a wall before themselves, two tiles high and eighteen long, all tiles face down(Scarne, 450).” The players are then designated a name of a wind— east, south, west, and north by rolling the die. Tonight, my mother is east, Ms. Qin is south, Ms. Chang is west, and Ms. Chu is north. The person sitting at the east location gives a roll of the die, and determines where the tile picking begins. Each player takes up 14 tiles of the 36 tiles laid out, going in order of course; from east position and going to the right. Once everyone has 14 tiles in their possession, all the players, quite simultaneously, flip up their tiles to reveal what is underneath. This is when the game becomes interesting.

Upon the white part of the tile, there are designs. These designs are similar to our diamonds, hearts, clubs, and clovers upon our playing cards. Yet, the designs on the tiles are much more intricate. “There are three different suits: circles (or dots), bamboos (or bams), and

characters (or cakes). Each suit comprises tiles numbered one through nine, and there are four of each type of tile (Diagram Group, 70). Once the tiles have been flipped over, each player does their own strategic way of organizing. Circles with circles, bamboo with bamboo, and characters with characters. Once the players have their tiles all organized, they begin to figure out their game plan. This is when the room becomes eerily quiet. The only sound heard is the quiet roaring of the refrigerator in the kitchen and the quiet sigh of the ladies. Eyes become extra thin, and the human stature becomes much more serious. Ms. Chang tries to make small conversation, maybe hoping to have the other ladies believe her bluff; no one takes it. As the tiles are picked up, and discarded into the center of the table, the speed begins to pick up. As the speed picks up, the players begin to anticipate, and therefore they become more relaxed and they have more conversation. Through a round of mahjongg, the conversation varies on topic. Speaking all in Mandarin Chinese, they speak of the weather, their children, what the next NEWAA (Northeast Wisconsin Asian Association) even will be, what is going on in Taiwan and China, and so on and so forth. All the while, they are aware of the happenings of the game; always being aware of the tiles being thrown out, and the tiles being collected. Mahjongg is a game of change. A player may be all set to win mahjongg in waiting for only one or two tiles, but as the game progresses and the tiles are not collected, a player may have to come out of their comfort zone and change their strategy. This can either be fatal or all well worth it.

As the game progresses into the night, the snacks are beginning to dwindle and the tea has been reheated many a time. There is a bathroom break after a full rotation around the table. This is the time for the ladies to stand up and stretch. Ms. Qin is having a great night of mahjongg, while Ms. Chang is struggling. They joke around and laugh, and then it is time to get back down to business. One moment there is laughter and chatter, and the next, there is silence. Besides the occasion conversation, the only real sound heard is, the gentle tapping of the tiles, fingers nails clicking upon the wooden sticks, and the occasion outburst. These outbursts are representative of the claiming of tiles when it might not be a player's particular turn.

“Chow, yi ge!,” declares my mother.

“Claiming a ‘chow’ is strictly for the player sitting to the right of the player who discarded the tile. To claim the tile, the player must already hold in their rack the other two tiles needed to make a ‘chow’ (Diagram Group, 72).” My mother ‘chow’ a three circle to make her one-two-three run of circles. She is ecstatic. She then discards a tile, and begins to ponder her

next move. After a while, a burst of excitement breaks the eerie silence making Ms. Chu almost fall out of her chair.

“PUNG!!!!!!,” declares Ms. Chang, with a mischievous smile.

“Claiming a ‘pung’ means the player claiming the pung must have in their possession two tiles identical to the tile they are claiming. Once claiming the tile, the player must expose their ‘pung’ to the rest of the players. ‘Pung’ can be called at any time, but with the restriction as stated above. Ms. Chang, very excited, ‘pung’ a five bamboo to go along with her pair of five bambo in her possession. She makes a comment, in Chinese, about how she was getting worried and how it was about time the tile showed. The ladies laugh at her comment, and all have that knowing look in their eye that Ms. Chang might actually win this round. They would be right.

“To make a ‘mahjongg’, a player must typically make four chows, pungs, or kongs (meaning four of a kind), plus an identical pair (Diagram Group, 72).” It is a very long process to make a mahjongg. Often times it is waiting for a chow or pung half the game, and end up having another player win the round by picking up your wanted tile themselves to win the round. Life’s not fair, and neither is mahjongg. Maybe that is why it is such a coveted game, the fact that the game can go on forever and it has that factor of unpredictability. The ladies of my mother’s mahjongg group love mahjongg because it has all the components of their heritage.

The game ends at around 11:30. Some of the ladies have an hour or more drive home. They count up their chip earning, and then take out their purses and fish out their wallets. Some of the ladies refuse to take the money, but somehow the money is slipped into their purse in the end. The big winner tonight turned out to be Ms. Qin. They turn off the desk lamp over the table, and turn on the kitchen light. They stand about the kitchen sipping tea and eating my mother’s delicacy as they chat and laugh. Ms. Qin is the first to leave. She is followed by Ms. Chu, and then Ms. Chang. As each of them were leaving, they kept saying how this was a lot of fun and how they should set-up another night to play. This night was great fun, but the next night of mahjongg had yet to be determined. When the ladies have all left, my mother takes a sigh of relief, turns off the outside light, and heads toward the kitchen. There, next to the sink is the pile of dishes. She wraps an apron around her, and gets to washing. She makes the comment of how she played well overall, and how she just got unlucky on a few rounds. When all the dishes are spotless, she unravels her apron, pours herself some water, and heads up to bed.

The mahjongg table is still standing in the middle of the room. Darkness. A night of mahjongg is a night of excitement and unpredictability. It is a night like no other. It is no wonder that today there are many variations of mahjongg all over the world.

The following morning, the mahjongg table is gone. Everything has been placed back into their original position. Yet, standing in that family room, in the spot where the table and excitement had occurred, one could still feel the power of mahjongg penetrating through the floor, and into body. My mother's mahjongg group is one of a kind, and so is the game of mahjongg. HU LE!!!!!!(The expression used in mahjongg to declare that one has made mahjongg).