

cards are pulled from the deck and no longer in play, it favors the house," Duke explains. "But when positive, low-value cards are pulled, it favors the player, because then you'll be able to predict that the high cards are on their way." We're trying to follow this. But the only thing we understand is that it's going to be a very long day.

From his seat at the dealer's position, Duke slowly turns over cards onto the green felt, and we begin a running count out loud: zero, minus one, minus two, minus one, zero, one, two, one, zero, minus one.... All eyes are on the cards as we count, totally focused until all the serious concentration finally wipes us out. Then, with appropriate solemnity, Duke makes an announcement: "Congratulations, ladies—on July 31, at approximately 2:25 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, you officially counted your first cards."

The next four days are packed with Duke's lessons, drills, and eventually practice games. He deftly adds and layers and combines skills, following his own curriculum. When we get frustrated about how these disparate abilities will translate to successful blackjack, he holds up his hand like a traffic cop: "We're not there yet," he says, and after the first 20 or 30 times, we start saying it for him. "Wait, when do we go up in our bets?" We're not there yet. "What happens if we can tell a table is ready but there are no seats available?" We're not there yet.

We start at nine each morning. Mercifully, around noon, Jill produces takeout menus, and we order sandwiches. We now get to add weight gain to our list of worries. By six we are exhausted, but also exhilarated. After 10 days of intense preparation, we've fallen into deep camaraderie, and while we laugh about almost everything, we're not laughing about the absurdity of becoming a card-counting team anymore.

**THE TIME HAS COME** for our "assault" on Atlantic City. Duke stashes his bag in the hotel room he's taken for himself, then stands in our doorway, watching his brand-new team of all-stars as we divvy up drawer space. "We've got some serious tables to take down, and we only have 24 hours to make the money I want to make," he announces with his usual swagger. But the only assault I can fathom is the one being perpetrated on my senses. Only Jill has any experience playing blackjack (she spent summers in Atlantic City as a kid). Frances and I haven't played—that is, if you don't count the two hands I tried (and lost!) at a European casino a few years ago. Here in Atlantic City, the volume is high, the lighting is lurid, and my only goal is to remain upright. For all our hours of rehearsal, opening night has left my mouth dry and my palms sending flash flood warnings to my wrists.

Soon we are up about \$500. I use the word "we" lightly, since I've had to be told every move to make

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