

at the table. Duke brushes an imaginary bit of lint off his jacket to signal when it's time to double down; he tugs at his collar when it's time to lower our bet; he taps his fingers together when it's time to move on. Five hundred bucks is not a disaster, but it won't even quite cover Duke's expenses for a team of three, and it's fairly anticlimactic after all the preparation. Still, the mood is more philosophical than demoralized.

Duke leads us to a hotel coffee shop for a debriefing. "It wasn't a good night because we just couldn't get a game," he explains. "But the most important thing you've done is avoid the many bad tables"—the ones where high rollers are literally losing thousands of dollars—"and there were a lot of them." He's absolutely right—it was impossible not to notice the preponderance of players who plunked down bets at the high-stakes table and lost everything in a matter of minutes. By the same token, it's nearly impossible to make a killing when you're putting down \$15 or \$25—instead of \$100 or \$1,000 or even \$10,000—per bet.

The next day, we attempt to play the tables on our own. Our individual strengths emerged during training: Duke has appointed me to be the ace tracker, Jill will be the

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primary card counter, and, in an adaptation for memory-compromised menopausal women, Frances will "lock down" the count at the end of each hand and make it available to Jill if she forgets. "Hey, Jill," she'll ask ever so casually, "did you say your dermatologist appointment is at noon on Tuesday?" And with one cleverly cloaked question, Frances has signaled Jill that she either could use a shot of Botox or needs to remember the number 12. (Duke christens this new position "The Verifier.") Much to my surprise, I end up predicting 90% of the aces in each hand. Score one for the girl who flunked algebra.

And score a lot more than that for Duke. In the wee hours of Sunday morning, we watch him manipulate an entire blackjack table, and it's something to see! In a matter of minutes, our leader has made enough money to more than pay for our entire endeavor, clearly demonstrating that while you can't count on luck, you *can* count cards. It's

a breathtaking display of skill, but for all of Duke's talk of "relieving multimillion-dollar corporations of their money," it's about more than that for us. There's no doubt we need the money, but the surprise payoff is that we're slowly being emboldened. Now we need to get back home—and back to our practice sessions.

"HELLO, ANGELS, this is Duke. I want you to make some money!" Our beloved guru, now back in California, is on speakerphone. Come hell or high water, we meet once a week all through autumn—usually at Jill's, always at night—performing drills until we know them backward in our sleep. Nothing keeps us from our work. When Frances's 5-year-old son throws up on the way to our session (yep, he gets to watch cartoons while Mommy "learns math"), Jill and I rush down to the street with paper towels and Oxi-Clean. "Was it George Clooney or Matt Damon who handled the carsick kid in *Ocean's Eleven*?" I ask as we blot and wipe. "I'm pretty sure you're thinking of Brad Pitt," Frances deadpans without missing a beat. But the bottom line is, we're beginning to have what Jill calls "wahoo moments," where all the cards align and we can see how a girl can make an awful lot of money in no time.

On a Friday night in December, Duke comes east for another casino trip. Sweet Frances, far from the blackjack neophyte she was only a few months earlier, complains about a couple at our table. "Nothing annoys me more than a player who doesn't understand basic strategy. If he wins, he thinks he knows what he's doing; meanwhile, he throws the cards off for the rest of us," she rails.

And then it happens: Using all the skills that Duke has taught us, I scout a \$15 table with three open seats. Jill counts. I track aces. Everything goes precisely the way it's supposed to go. We follow Jill's signals and raise our bets in



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