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Playing Cards

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PLAYING CARDS

Dinah Cox

The vaccine card is not the library card is not the voter registration card is not the greeting card. The Queen of Hearts has been oversold, by now both sentimental and sadistic, the cruel mother who will transform you into a specimen at once too small and too large to fit through the keyhole of the much-vaunted male imagination. And the King? He is playing you. He is trumping you. Go ahead and pretend he's one of the good ones, but I've seen him asking his buddies to come over to take turns with a cigar while cooking shriveled roots from the garden. All for your dinner, he says, but he's fattening you for slaughter. Is that a cliché? Maybe it is, but it's not your fault. Maybe it is your fault. Maybe he's in a band. Maybe he's into downhill skiing. Maybe he's interested in his own interests. Whomever he voted for—in the primaries, of course—you voted for him, too.

It was an easy decision, you said, the right thing to do, just as allowing him “his own space” made sense three months ago but now leads to your never-ending loneliness, a boring malady you expect me to cure. The baseball card is not the punch card is not the yellow card, each one forbidden to all but those in the know. He wanted you to check out a book. He wanted to be the one who wrote it. He wanted you to get vaccinated so that you could spend more time with your friends. He wanted you to have your own friends, maybe a nice married teacher's aide or a first-year student in the veterinary college. He wanted either a greeting card or extra credit for selecting the exact right greeting card. He wanted a gun. He wanted a rope. Once, a long time ago, he said he wanted you.

Put the face cards in a pile—quickly, now, before he comes home. The appointment card is not the index card is not the cardboard box, though all three have proliferated in your pile of important things to do. If you're an organized career woman, a flamingo with a leather briefcase, he'll perform very particular household chores, the ones he might rebrand as artistic. He has begun to call it The Home. If, like the gay man on the pharmaceutical commercial, you have trouble managing the intricacies of the television's remote control, he will put you in A Home. If your dog chews his sneaker, he will re-home your pets, all of them, even the quiet ones not prone to destruction. The vaccine card is not the health certificate is not the pedigree is not the card you carry in your wallet, the smudged

record of your fingerprints in case you turn up missing. He says he's your champion, your cheerleader, someone who swoons at the sound of your laughter. He grows beefsteak tomatoes, puts them in a basket, and gives them to your boss. The recipe card is not the discount card is not the Jack of Hearts. Standing in the entryway to take your coat and hat, he'll warn you of intruders and saboteurs. He knows when to call a spade a spade.

Just how long will he be willing to play second fiddle to your first chair flute? He says he doesn't see it that way, but everyone else can see the writing on the wall. The membership card is not the union card is not the credit card. When your underlings see you walking hand in hand, they imagine his hand is larger. They imagine your hand is softer. They imagine he's saving up to buy you a ring. The bank card is not the discount card is not the Father's Day card featuring a cartoon toolbox and joke about the dad-jokes his dad never tells. Did you hear the one about the woman who had a baby? She was pushing a stroller, but still appeared pregnant. Her body—prick it with a pin as if it were a hot air balloon—was hilarious. The vaccine card is not the gender card is not the business card. Mr. and Mrs. Meal Ticket, he said on the phone when you overhead him making reservations. Mrs. Meal Ticket will be dining alone. It's been such a long time since he's played pinochle, he says, and he longs to live again inside the smoky haze of memory, a basement free from the sound of your laughter, a sound—remember—he always says he adores. The cue card is not the room service card is not the truth card. It never was.

The wool card is not the place card is not the gift card enclosed in an envelope. These are the items present at my dinner party, an occasion I'm hosting in your honor. Don't worry, there will be plenty of cheese. When I was fourteen, I played the nurse in Romeo and Juliet, also Aunt Em in The Wizard of Oz and Rizzo in Grease. You see the kind of girl I was. He, too, could see it, better than you could, and although I willingly became his card-carrying competitor, it was you who received the valentine. When they passed out report cards, mine said, Satisfactory. Yours said, Satisfactory. His said, Satisfactory Plus. Plus what-? Plus his tutor gave him a set of flashcards, and he knows everything as a result. He's a Jack of all Trades. I'm the Jill of Clubs, otherwise known as the girl next door who wants so desperately to move away she sets your house on fire. Where's your insurance card? You're going to need it.

Pick a card, any card. The checkbook is not the storybook is not the matchbook. At the homecoming dance, I am the one who polishes your twin thrones. If there are refreshments to be served, I will serve them. And your friend, the second runner-

up-? The judges awarded her boyfriend the title of Mr. Hate Crime 2021. That makes her the queen of hate crimes, the princess of the punchbowl stirring soda in a baby's bottle, the only way, she says, to prevent tooth decay in minors. I heard you all went sailing together. A sailboat is not a tugboat is not a ship of fools. Or maybe it is. I think I owe you a thank-you-card. Dear King and Queen. You're really going places. Please accept my best wishes for a future free from gambling, soothsaying, and commerce. Here's my calling card. The winning card is not the hidden card is not the trick card. It's true I'm rooting for your ultimate misery. And his. That's the way, he always told me, you're supposed to play the game.

DINAH COX's first book of stories, *Remarkable*, appeared as winner of the Fourth Annual BOA Short Fiction Prize from BOA Editions. A second collection appeared in 2019 from PANK Books. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Florida Review*, *Jabberwock Review*, and *Arts & Letters*.