

RICHARD SAMUELS

A House Of Cards

“I can bring it up to eight levels now.”

My roommate sat on the couch before the coffee table, proudly displaying his latest house of cards. He brushed his jet black hair off to the side, away from his eyes.

“That’s great, Paul,” I said.

“I’m gonna try for nine—you think I should?”

I mumbled a forced, “Go ahead,” and walked into the kitchen to make my dinner. Paul resumed work on his latest generation of card houses. For nearly a month now, he’d been spending all of his free time sitting in our small apartment and methodically stacking his playing cards into fragile structures. His parents were paying his way through college, so he didn’t have a job to interfere with his precious obsession. Our den doubled as his bedroom, and he’d always be there, always in intense concentration.

Just after his fiancée had broken off their engagement, he could manage an occasional smile. Once he saw that his world had collapsed, his temperament rapidly changed. Since he’d become my roommate, I’d never known him to be emotionally expressive. He was a soft spoken, relaxed person, and a loner. He’d been unobtrusive, which was the very reason I’d agreed to room with him.

Now he was downright morose. I tried for a while to talk with him about it, but decided the depression wasn’t worth it. He was just my roommate, after all. It wasn’t as if he were one of my friends. If I had met him on the street, I would have looked right through him.

I heard Paul shout and ran back to the den. He sat with his head in his hands, sobbing. His house had collapsed.

I was too astonished to say a word.

He looked up at me with reddened eyes. “I hate this place!” he screamed. His eyes darted frantically across the room. He looked over to the door and the front window. On

seeing that the window was open, he raced over to it.

"There's too many drafts!" he declared, and slammed it shut.

I was furious. "It's ninety degrees in here!"

He walked past me and sat back at his place on the couch, and swept the playing cards to the side so that he could begin again. "I can't risk it, Thomas," he said. He was deadly serious.

I started for the window.

"Don't!"

I ignored him and reopened the window.

He jumped up and charged to the window. I blocked his path.

"I'm not going to suffocate because of you!"

He was determined. "I've got to have it closed!"

"Why? So you can build your damn houses?"

He paused, fuming with a rage infinitely out of proportion.

"Yes." He tried to reach for the window. I grabbed him by the wrist.

"If you try to close that thing, I swear . . ."

He glared at me. He knew I wouldn't actually do anything, but nevertheless retreated back to the couch and his cards.

The phone rang. It was just beside him, but I knew he wouldn't take it and quickly answered it myself. It was my girlfriend, Denise. I immediately made plans to take her out to dinner, and was out of the apartment in less than ten minutes. I ran to my car, anxious to escape as quickly as possible.

We had dinner at a pizza place just off campus. It was a Tuesday night, so the crowd wasn't as large and obnoxious as usual. I told Denise about my irritation with Paul and his cards.

She said I should let it go. She said I should ignore him.

"That's kind of hard to do," I explained, "He's always there—all the time, morning, noon, and night!"

She took a bite of the pizza, chewing on it as she spoke. "Well . . . why should you care . . . you're not his mother."

I shook my head. "You don't understand, Deni . . . I mean, don't you feel sorry for him? I mean, the guy was going to get married."

She giggled, and poked at me, making me laugh. "And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Come on, you know what I mean! She broke off with him. Ever since, he's been getting worse and worse."

She put her arms around me. "Well, *you'll* never have to build card houses."

I put my arms around her. "Hope not." And I kissed her.

I didn't return home until late that night. I expected to find Paul at the same place on the couch, with his cards on the coffee table before him, but he wasn't there.

I heard a tapping to my left, and turned to face it.

I could have fallen over.

In one corner of the den stood a square booth, made of unfinished wood, about three feet on each side and extending to the ceiling. The side that faced me had been fastened with an aluminum-frame glass door, behind which, illuminated by a small desk lamp secured to the wall, sat my roommate. He, in turn, sat behind a low shelf. There stood his latest card house.

Paul stared at me, waiting for a reaction. He pointed to the card house and held up ten fingers, indicating he'd reached ten levels.

I walked up to the booth and ran my hand along a corner of it. I wasn't entirely sure it was real.

It was.

I shook my head in disbelief. "You can't keep this thing here!"

He gave me a small, insulting smile, reached above the door to a hidden enclave, and pulled down a shade.

I'm not sure how much time he spent in the booth that first night, but Paul was still there early the next morning. The shade was rolled up and the yellow sunlight highlighted the card house.

I stood by the booth door until Paul realized I was there. He pointed at his newest house and said, "Fifteen levels," and then began work on the sixteenth.

"Don't you think you're overdoing it?"

He studied the card house a moment. "No. I think I'm ready for sixteen levels."

"That's not what I meant," I said.

"Oh? Then I don't know what you're talking about."

"You *know* what I'm talking about."

He ignored me, and added another card to the house.

"It's getting crazy, Paul."

He glanced at me an instant. "You're standing in my light."

I didn't move. "We gotta get this thing out of here!"

Paul rolled his eyes. "When I'm finished." He pulled down the shade again and turned on his light.

"When's that going to be?" I shouted.

He didn't answer.

We didn't talk for the next several days. I tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, to go about my life with only a casual, pitiful look at my peculiar friend, who by now had stopped going to school entirely so that he could remain in the booth and work on his houses. For a time, Paul had an obsession within an obsession as he labored to complete his eighteenth level. His attempts would repeatedly end in ruin. At these times, he would pause for a minute, as if in contemplation, then begin again.

After a week in the booth, Paul's appearance took on a haggard, worn look. His face grew pale, and dark circles appeared under his normally dark, deep-set eyes. Despite what Denise had asked, I found I couldn't ignore what was happening. I became more and more fascinated with the absolute dedication Paul held for his work. When his parents called, he refused to come to the phone. I felt no misgivings about lying for him. As the second week of his "captivity," as it were, began, I started to vigorously defend him to my doubtful friends. I told them that Paul would get himself in the Book of World Records someday—and believed it myself.

"What are you doing?" Paul asked me midway through the second week. I was approaching the booth with several cans of paint and a few brushes.

"I'm gonna paint the booth."

“Why?”

“Well, you’re almost up to 25 levels, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, we’re going to have a party!”

Paul was very annoyed. “Thomas—I don’t want people here!”

“But it’s 25 levels!” I argued. “That’s really something!”

Paul’s current card house collapsed on the eighth level, adding to his irritation. “Hell, it’s only a card house; who cares?”

“They will! It’ll really be something,” I assured him. I held up the cans of paint. “I’m gonna paint the booth with playing cards all over. And I bought a plaque with your name that we’re going to put on the door!”

“You’re crazy,” he said.

I smiled at him. “No more than you are!”

He grumbled, “Fine, do what you want,” and pulled down the shade.

Thirty people squeezed into our apartment that Friday night and took positions around the booth, now painted red, black and white with pictures of kings, queens, jokers, hearts and diamonds. I was a business major, not an artist, so it was all very crude; still, I tried to do my best. The shade in the booth was pulled down. The show hadn’t yet begun.

I went into the kitchen to get some more food for the party. I was nervous and excited. I was looking forward to Paul’s main event. After a moment, Denise joined me. We were alone.

“How come you haven’t called?” she asked.

I smiled, “It’s *only* been a couple of days. I’ve been busy setting up the party . . .”

She wasn’t satisfied. “It can’t take up all your time.”

“Well, yeah, with that and school—”

“Tom, that’s not it. Look at you—you’re a wreck, like Paul.”

“No, I’m not. Here.” I shoved a bowl of popcorn at her. “Help me take this stuff in the den.” I walked in that direction.

“Tom, he’s just your roommate.”

I stopped a moment. “Denise, he’s my friend. I—I just

want to help him.” We went back to the den and handed out the food.

I knocked on the booth door. “We’re ready, Paul.”

Paul let the shade roll up. He looked nervously at me. His hands were trembling. So were mine. Paul looked out at his audience, and began to build.

At first, he was shaking so badly I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to finish the first level, but he slowly regained control of himself and reached his usual, confident clip.

Applause and cheers accompanied the completion of every new level, followed with near total silence as the next level was attempted. My throat was parched by the time Paul completed the 24th level. I was so amazed I was only vaguely aware of the reappearance of a smile on his face, for the first time in weeks.

Now, even the munching of popcorn ceased. No one dared to move. I could hear my heart beating. All eyes were fixed unblinkingly on Paul’s house of cards.

I looked over to Denise. It was as I suspected. Even she was entranced.

A card slipped from Paul’s grasp. He cautiously picked it up and returned it to what was to be the 25th level. He leaned that card against another to create the first two walls. He added a third. He reached down and removed a card from the deck to become the fourth wall. He leaned it against the other cards. All was in order. He let go of the card.

The four walls collapsed. The weight of the fall was just enough to cause the collapse of the level below it, which in turn caused the collapse of the level below that level, and so on to the bottom level.

Paul stared mournfully at the formless pile of playing cards. There was a stunned silence in the room.

He looked up from the cards and searched his audience’s long faces, as they searched his.

Paul examined his playing cards again. He looked about at the room—at the walls and ceiling. He tapped his fingers on the shelf for a moment, as if in deep thought, and then seemed to come to a decision.

“I’m coming out!” he shouted, as if it were a royal decree. He quickly smiled at me, but I was too mortified to smile back. He bounded out of his booth into the crowd of happy party-goers.

There was a great deal of loud, animated chatter. Paul seemed to be apologizing for not completing the card house, as if it were a joke. I was ashamed of him.

I eyed the booth. It stood alone, the door wide open. The pile of playing cards waited silently on the shelf, beckoning me.

I looked back at the others, preoccupied with their everyday lives. I pitied them. There were certainly greater things—more important things. I could see that now.

I climbed into the booth and shut the door behind me. I reached up above the door, took hold of the shade, and pulled it down.

There was work to be done.