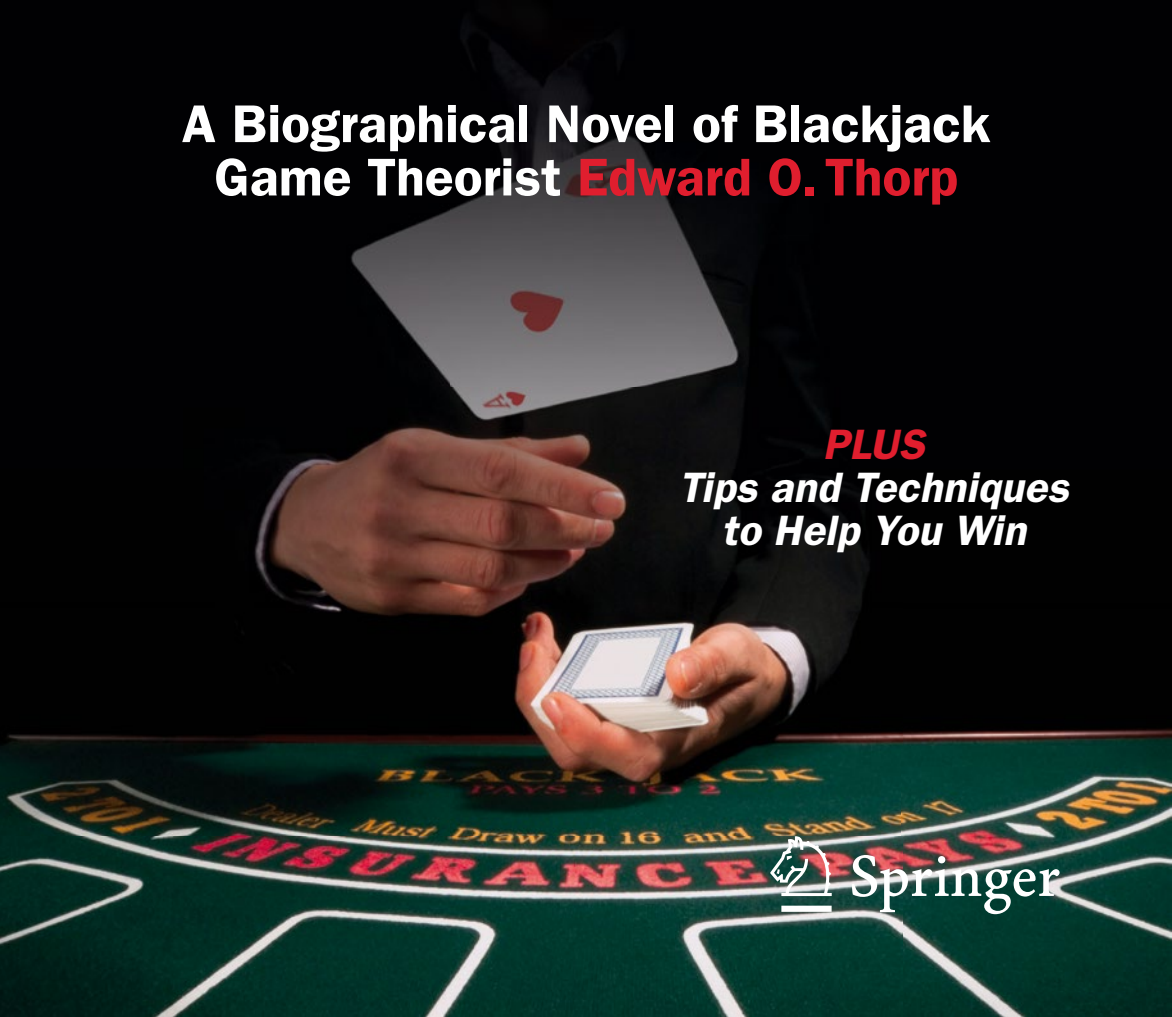
Les Golden

NEVER SPLIT TENS!

A Biographical Novel of Blackjack Game Theorist Edward O. Thorp



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A Biographical Novel of Blackjack Game Theorist Edward O. Thorp

Illustrations by the author

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Tips and Techniques to Help You Win

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To my parents, Anne K. and Irving R. Golden, my beloved pets Duffy, Tweetie, Byron, Cicero, Skipper, Emerson, Newton, Maxwell, and Enrico, and Kitty, the feral cat who let me take her into my home, as well as Whitey, Blackie, and Momma, my most recent rescued felines, the family of birds in my window at my apartment on Broadway in Oakland, the fluffy white dog on Broadway near my apartment in Oakland, and Chirpie my robin and Finchie, the blinded red house finch I brought back to health and released, to a loud, exultant chirp of joy, and all the other needy, stray, and abandoned dogs and feral cats and kittens, opossum, raccoons, rabbits, squirrels, rats, mice, chipmunks, birds, and other wildlife, farm and zoo animals, fish, flying, burrowing, and crawling insects, and trees, bushes, plants, and grasses, all residents of the Earth, that I have befriended, loved, saved, tried to save, and mourned. We don't own the Earth; we simply share it.

Oakley reasoned out loud, in furious thought.
"Blackjack, for crying out loud, is not a game of chance!"

Preface

This semi-biographical novel recounts how mathematician Dr. Edward O. Thorp revolutionized the casino industry with the development and popularization of card counting in his 1962 and 1966 editions of *Beat the Dealer*. That history stands by itself. This, however, is a novel, and so one may ask: what is the book about?

The apocryphal story goes that when the writers of *Fiddler on the Roof* approached producer Harold Prince, he asked them, "What is the play about?" To make the story short, they stammered and finally replied "tradition." He told them to go and write a song about tradition. Now, my book contains discussions of the meaning of life, including that of Somerset Maugham in *Of Human Bondage*, propagating the species, achieving pleasure, and providing food for other species, and I had let the characters conclude that the meaning of life was to gain immortality! We live so that we shall never die. Thorp has confided in friends that he is concerned that his contribution to probability theory will be recognized when he is no longer alive. Some in academia believe that Thorp's work in probability has made him an immortal. As Fiddler is about tradition, *Never Split Tens* is about immortality. By the way, they're the same thing, aren't they!?—cultural and individual immortality.

This book then is a semi-biographical, romantic novel about a mathematician who gains immortality. To do so, he must consort with gangsters to fund his gambling experiments in Nevada and Puerto Rico.

Because of the discussions of math in a biographical novel context, I consider this book to be "Stanislovski for card counters." Presenting theory in the context of narrative is a centuries-old grand literary tradition and style. In science, for example, we have Galileo's *Dialogues on the Two Chief World Systems* and *Dialogues on Two Sciences*. The influential acting books by Boleslavsky, Stanislovski, and, in

modern times, Sanford Meisner, all present acting theory in the context of acting classes, a narrative. The mode appears in other genre.

Here, unlike the many books on blackjack which directly present the mathematics of the various systems in textbook style, I present many elements of the mathematics of card counting in the context of the narrative. I present some of the principles of probability that Thorp developed, some probability theory, calculation of indices, expectation values for the complete point count system, higher level systems, comparison of the ten count strategy and complete point count system, camouflage techniques, Small Martingale and Reverse Martingale, advantages and disadvantages of sitting in third base, and how a card counting system is developed. I also present money management and camouflage techniques. All are introduced within the context of the novel, a narrative.

I, in particular, frequently detail various camouflage techniques. These include ones developed by Thorp and others as well as ones I conjured up. These include coming into town to audition as a musical act or stand-up comic and getting toked to hit the tables; using the Bible as a guide to strategy, betting, and laying out when the deck is cold; using a rigged toy slot machine to do the same; playing a "perfumed" drunk there only for the free drinks; wearing a parka and ski boots to present oneself as a skier hitting the tables after the slopes have closed; and acting as a man desperately desiring to get invited to all those wild showgirl parties.

That relates to one of the reasons I wrote the screenplay, from which this book is reverse-adapted. From my years as a gambling columnist for five UK-based magazines, I learned that others had taken credit for concepts that Thorp had developed. For example, Thorp discussed the strategy of standing behind the players at a blackjack table, waiting for the deck to favor the player, and then sitting down and placing large bets. He called this "strike when the deck is hot," such an important strategy that I borrowed it for the title of Chapter 18. Other workers have coined terms for this, implying they developed the concept. He also introduced the concept of blackjack teams, referring to them as "cooperative friends." Others claim to have developed such a tactic. I find such behavior intellectually dishonest, and I wanted to somehow reclaim Thorp's inventions.

As I prepared this book, I realized that the gambling literature has not done justice to the contributions of those mathematicians who became known as the Four Horsemen of Aberdeen, Roger Baldwin, Wilbert Cantey, Herbert Maisel, and James McDermott, and to Harvey Dubner. The former group published the first basic analysis of blackjack, and Dubner electrified the standing-room only audience at the 1963 Fall Joint Computer Conference

in Las Vegas with his presentation of the original "Hi-Lo" strategy. Based on conversations with Dr. Maisel, I discuss the former group briefly.

Based on numerous interactions with the Dubner family, I present a lengthy discussion of Mr. Dubner's professional life and contribution in an appendix. Because of Dubner's importance and that this may be the only "biography" of him ever written, I felt somewhat justified in displaying his son's passion for his father's position by quoting him at length. This sometimes leads to repetition of material.

I also include three other appendices in this book. One discusses the manner in which I altered historical fact for the purpose of the narrative, including a comparison of the dates I establish in the novel to the actual dates in Thorp's life. I note what fictional portions of the novel were created for the story itself. This appendix adds to the biographical value of this book. The second appendix presents a discussion of the concepts behind the twenty or so most well-known counting systems developed in response to the 1966 second edition of Thorp's *Beat the Dealer*. I list them in order of complexity rather than the puzzlingly non-instructive practice of all other gambling writers of listing them in alphabetical order.

Professional blackjack players know that skillful money management and effective camouflage in addition to facility with the mathematics of the card counting system are needed to ensure a winning career. Much of the pedagogical value of this book lies in the presentation of aspects of these two elements of card counting within the narrative. The acting aspect of camouflage has received little discussion in the literature of blackjack. As a professional actor, I add a third appendix, on using acting techniques as camouflage.

In short, I hope you'll find reading *Never Split Tens* to be an enjoyable means of obtaining many of the mathematical, money management, and camouflage skills needed to be a successful card counter. As I noted, you could consider it Stanislovski for card counters. On the other hand, you can just read it for the romance and its wit, charm, and humor. As my acting and writing mentor Del Close, the late guru of the Second City improvisation nightclub in Chicago would say, "All stories are love stories." *Never Split Tens* is, after all, a love story.

Introduction

How I Entered a Life of Sin and Degradation . . . and Playing Blackjack for Fun and Profit!

My twin brother Bruce and I had a gang of high school friends who, during high school, college, and young adulthood, would get together in our basement recreation/bar room for a game of poker, joke-telling, and pizza, pretzels, and beer. Bruce and I, Mike Flickinger (University of Illinois), Evan Jacobsen (Miami of Ohio), Dave Westerman (University of Michigan), Lee Campbell (Yale), Jack Camphouse (Naval Academy), Ira Epstein (University of Illinois), Dale Brozosky (University of Michigan), and sometimes Dick Haines (Miami of Ohio), Chris Jones (Occidental College), and Dennis Saliny (Purdue), with the occasional other visitor, would utilize our lofty intellects in playing for the high stakes of a nickel a chip, maximum three-chip raise, around that green fold-up circular pad we put on the card table. The chips were housed in a Quaker Oatmeal cylindrical box, decorated, as a Horace Mann elementary school project, with green wallpaper for our old marble collection.

If you lost $5, it was a devastating night. We became knowledgeable in the various types of poker games, such as In-Between, 5-card stud, 5-card draw,

7-card stud, Baseball, Night Baseball, Spit in the Ocean, High-Low, N-----, Indian poker, Hearts, and Chicago, as well as blackjack.

I'm happy to say that despite my bad influence, all of these friends have had successful professional lives. Only I entered into a life of sin and degradation.

It was only natural that when Bruce took a vacation to the Bahamas one year after college, he learned about the so-called basic strategy of playing blackjack. He told me about the Oswald Jacoby book that he had studied.

As a graduate student in astronomy at the University of California, Berkeley, I had been instrumental in founding the University of California Jazz Ensembles, the fabulous organization that has produced scores of professional musicians and the home of the Pacific Coast Collegiate Jazz Festival. In 1972, we went to our first jazz festival, the Reno Jazz Festival.

My brother and clarinetist Ron Svoboda, his friend in the Oak Park-River Forest High School orchestra, had formed The Deuces dance band. We bought the music from the previous band at Oak Park High, The Dominoes (whose graduates included trombonist/baritone singer Paul Kiesgan and trumpet player Bill Vogel of The Dukes of Dixieland); they had bought the music from the previous band at Oak Park High, A Band Called X-Squared. I also played trumpet in the Deuces. We were originally going to call the band "Deuces Wild" but decided on just "The Deuces," based on the name of the singing group, The Four Aces. The album we made, though, was called "Deuces Wild."

Among our illustrious alums is Jon Deak, the former assistant principal bassist with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, who is renowned as a composer of classical music with jazz influence. Jon had been a piano player, who converted to bass for purposes of playing in the high school orchestra. He got his on-the-job instruction in jazz with the Deuces. My brother is proud to relate that he taught Jon how to play pizzacato (fingers only). Jon's father, an artist, painted the music stands with the Deuces playing card logo.

Bruce went to MIT for college. A high-note trumpet player, he was the lead trumpet player for the MIT Techtonians Jazz Band, under the direction of trumpet player Herb Pomeroy. Indeed, Herb, as Bruce related it, only took on the position when he heard Bruce play at his audition. At Cornell University, where I went to college, we regrettably had no jazz band. We had a group that rehearsed, to my recollection, once, in a room in the Willard Straight Hall student union.

When I went to Berkeley, I thought for sure that here in this hip place there would be a jazz band. There wasn't. Bandleader, composer/arranger, and trombonist Don Piestrup had had a group there in the 1950s, I was told, but when I arrived in 1966 no big band existed. I put an ad in the *Daily Californian* and got some replies. I remember that of the twenty or so who answered the ad, about twelve were guitar players. One fellow told me that

although he had just started playing the guitar in a couple months he'd be ready to play jazz in the band.

The following year, one of the fellows who had answered my ad, Bob Docken, a trombone player in the Cal marching band, put his own ad in the Daily Cal. This time he had sufficient response and with the aid of Rick Penner, a trumpet player in the Cal band, the UC Stage Band started rehearsing in the Cal band rehearsal room on Sunday nights. I think the classic arrangements we played were from the Cal band library.

Membership and attendance was inconsistent, but we did put on a spring concert on Lower Sproul Plaza which was documented in an article I wrote for the Daily Cal. It included a famous quote from Bay Area jazz educator and KJAZ disc jockey, Herb Wong, "What, a jazz band at Cal!"

Only when Dr. David Tucker arrived at Berkeley in the fall of 1968 from the University of Illinois to be the arranger for the Cal band did the jazz group, the University of California Jazz Ensembles, or more commonly UC Jazz Ensembles, really gain stability. He had a strong jazz background and played regularly in the Tahoe show bands. Dave remained one of my two best lifelong friends, passing away in 2003.

Far from simply gaining stability, under Dr. Tucker's leadership, inspiration, winning personality, and energy, we soon had three big bands, numerous instrumental groups, and classes, and gave numerous performances. These included concerts every Thursday noontime on Lower Sproul Plaza and Friday night concerts in the Bear's Lair.

The band sponsored the fabulously successful Pacific Coast Collegiate Jazz Festival, later dropping the "Collegiate" part of the title. Over a weekend, scores of high school and college instrumental and vocal jazz groups from the western states competed. We had guest artists perform at the Saturday night formal concert with the premier Wednesday Night Band, including Ed Shaughnessy, Freddie Hubbard, Sonny Rollins, Hubert Laws, and George Duke. By 1972, Dave judged that we were ready to perform at our first jazz festival, the renowned Reno Jazz Festival.

This was my chance. I went to the famous Moe's Bookstore on Telegraph Avenue to look for the Oswald Jacoby book that my brother had read, and I discovered the 1966 edition of Edward Thorp's *Beat the Dealer.* Clearly, this was a far more advanced approach to playing blackjack than the basic strategy presented by Jacoby. I mastered the complete point count system and on our trip to Reno experienced my first winnings. We stayed at the memorable Bee Gay Motel.

My mastery resulted in part from practicing with my then girlfriend Diane Dring in the noisy Bear's Lair, to simulate the atmosphere of a casino. Diane's

mother had been a cabaret vocalist and perhaps Vegas showgirl, if I remember. Was this an omen of things to come?

It was on this trip that Glenn Markoe's hitting blackjack on his one and only bet occurred. It was on this trip that I not only convinced myself that the system could be used to earn sizable cash but also made a believer out of a doubter. Glenn Markoe was a French horn player in the band, as well as the brother of comedian and writer Merrill Markoe, who was for many years the girlfriend of David Letterman as well as the head writer for "Late Night With David Letterman."

Glenn was a doubter. He doubted that a winning system could be devised to win consistently at blackjack. He doubted that I could master one of those systems. Worse, he doubted me when I told him the deck was hot, very hot.

A couple of guys in the band were walking from one large room to another in Harold's Club through basically a corridor with a couple tables slapped against the wall. One table had only one player, so I told Glenn and the other guys to stop. I watched the game progress. The deck started to get warm. Glenn wanted to move on. I said, "Hold on."

The deck got hotter. I whispered to Glenn, "The deck is getting hot. Hold on." The deck got very hot. I whispered to Glenn, "Put down $10." He looked at me, bewildered. I was a graduate student in astronomy. He was studying Egyptian tombs as an ancient art and archaeology graduate student. We obviously had a problem communicating.

I should note that, following other distinguished appointments, Dr. Glenn Markoe was Curator of Classical and Near Eastern Art and Art of Africa and the Americas at the Cincinnati Art Museum for twenty-three years.

The deck got even hotter. This was perhaps the hottest deck I had seen so far on the trip. I was nearly frantic as I whispered in Glenn's ear, "Put down the $10!"

Glenn still had that bewildered look on his face. The dealer was getting down to the end of the deck and I was afraid she was going to shuffle up and destroy our advantage. As a friend of the Greek scholar Socrates, I knew that only by Glenn laying down the bet and experiencing the euphoria (note, a Greek-origin word) would he really appreciate the beauty of the system.

One more time, "Glenn, bet the $10!" Glenn reached over the player and put the cash on an empty spot on the table.

Glenn was new to the tables and didn't wait for both cards to be dealt before peeking. An Ace. The dealer gave him his second card. A Jack. Glenn got blackjack! He got blackjack on his one and only bet on the trip. The dealer shuffled the deck. I said let's go. Glenn, predictably, gave me his bewildered look. "Why leave now?" In any case, Glenn was now a believer.

During the rest of my sojourn at Berkeley, I made monthly trips to Reno. I would leave on a Sunday afternoon, when the other casino players would be returning to the Bay Area, and stay through Tuesday afternoon. This schedule was selected to enable me to play alone at the tables, one-up against the dealer. It was in these trips that I began to develop the camouflage strategies that I relate in this book.

I knew I was on the right track when the "chicken soup" buses of San Francisco Chinatown residents were passing me going west as I was driving east to Reno. The chicken soup moniker comes from their bringing containers of soup with them as they left San Francisco for Reno.

One year in the 1970s, Bruce came out to California and we spent a month travelling through Nevada, hitting Tahoe, Reno, Carson City, and Las Vegas. He had by now read *Beat the Dealer* and employed the "ten count strategy" technique. Both of us having engineering degrees, we were interested to compare the results of the two Thorp techniques. Events of that trip form the basis for several anecdotes in this book.

In particular, the toy "magic" slot machine episodes mentioned in Chapter 14 and Chapter 15 were based on fact. Usually, to avoid being seen on the same shift, my brother and I would play on opposite sides of the street downtown. One day I appeared at the Four Queens, I believe, and the dealers asked about the magic slot machine. I didn't know what they were talking about and said so. They persisted, however, and then I realized it was my brother they had seen using it. I said, "Oh, you must mean my twin brother." They didn't believe the story about my being a twin, so later that day we came in together. The dealers were so entertained by the toy slot machine and our actually being twins that they henceforth would shuffle up the deck when we asked them to do so. We'd do that when the deck became cold, that is, in favor of the house. When the deck was hot, we'd tell them not to shuffle up the deck and they would oblige.

With my advisors' research grants, my earnings as leader of the "Les Morris Quintet," a dance band I formed in which I used other members of the UC Jazz Ensembles, and my gambling winnings, I was perhaps the first graduate student in the history of the Earth to come out of grad school with more money than that with which I entered.

Moving back to Oak Park in 1980, I took a sabbatical from playing blackjack. In addition to teaching, I studied improvisation with the late guru Del Close of the Second City improvisation nightclub in Chicago and began a career as an actor. After retiring from teaching, with gambling casinos now existing throughout Illinois, I queried various newspapers about becoming a gambling columnist. I was eventually directed to Lyceum Publishing in London,

which was embarking on a new glossy print gambling magazine, *Gambling.com* magazine. I would eventually write for five London-based gambling magazines mainly on blackjack, but also on craps and roulette.

* * *

At some period in this new career, I decided to write a screenplay based on Thorp's life. I was upset that many workers in the field had appropriated his techniques, to the extent of one actually having a particular technique named after himself. Thorp had also suggested team play at blackjack, now famous from numerous gambling teams and a movie.

This book is a reverse adaptation of that screenplay.

The path to writing *Never Split Tens* has experienced many turns, detours, and new highway construction. As a result, I am indebted to many people. I would willingly pay back those debts with my blackjack winnings, but these words will suffice.

It all began with cornet playing and the Deuces. I am indebted to my dad, Irving, who bought us our first cornets and then my Bach Stradivarius trumpet, my mom, Anne, who schlepped us to Mr. Ben Purdom's Suburban Music and then Jerry Cimera's (renowned trombone soloist with the John Philip Sousa band) house and Adolph "Bud" Herseth's (renowned principal trumpet with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) house for lessons, and to my twin brother, who started up that dance band and who found that Oswald Jacoby book.

I am indebted to my dear parakeet, Tweetie, who helped me through my graduate school years. I am indebted to those who originally created my interest in theatre, English teacher Nina Grace Smith and English teacher and theatre director Knowles Cooke of Oak Park-River Forest High School. I am indebted to my late, dear, dear friend, Dr. David W. Tucker, for ensuring that the institution of the University of California Jazz Ensembles would thrive and taking the Wednesday Night Band of the UC Jazz Ensembles to Reno in 1972, without which jazz festival trip I would never have encountered *Beat the Dealer*. I am indebted to the late improv guru Del Close for teaching me how to write a scene.

Oak Park, IL, USA Les Golden

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Contents

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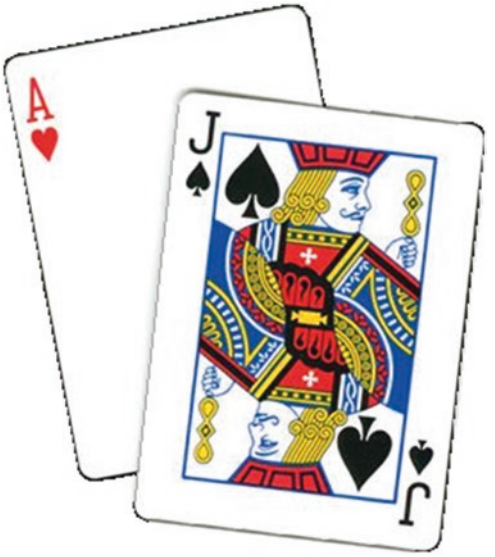
Part I

Doubling Down



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Recollections

May, 1964
Harrah's Casino
South Lake Tahoe
Stateline, Nevada

Of the fifty or so patrons standing by the craps table, the only men who stared at tthe $10,000 in $500 and $1000 gambling chips that the enticing Rosette had laid down were the eunuchs. A sign noting "Reserved for Private Party" sat on the table. Rosette wore an alluringly clinging orange chiffon dress, which coordinated nicely with her orange-colored $1000 "pumpkin" chips. Maybe those were real pink pearls that dangled from her necklace.

The ca-chinking of slot machines competed with live music, multiple conversations, and the nearby roulette croupier call of "Rien ne va plus." With their senses of sight and hearing overloaded with these multiple inputs, the sensory-inebriated crowd at the craps table laughed and yelled encouragement as Rosette rolled the dice and implored the gods of the craps table.

"Bring it home to your sweet peach pie momma. Momma needs a few new pairs of shoes!" Rosette apparently liked posh footwear.

My dad was seated about thirty yards away, the only player at a blackjack table. Large stacks of $25 chips lay on the table in front of him. He was playing three hands at the same time, and next to each were $100 in $25 chips. A King of Spades and ten of Hearts, a Queen of Clubs and a Queen of Diamonds, and a Jack of Clubs and a ten of Clubs, each hand with a value of 20, good blackjack hands, stared upward at the ceiling.

The dealer seemed mildly interested. She had seen it all, no doubt, but maybe not quite this. Her frilly white blouse obscured some wrinkled neck

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skin, the indication of either too much weight or too much sun. "Betty Lou" read her I.D. name tag. Her up-card, a four of Clubs, must have felt out of place in the presence of all that royalty. Her down card. .. Well, they'd soon all find out.

My dad, Edward Oakley Thorp, sat in the chair by the stacks of chips. The twenty or so people watching were hushed. The noise was as loud as a Tibetan monk's breathing while in the lotus position at sunrise.

Betty Lou held the deck of cards in her left hand. Oakley – my sisters and I usually called him by his middle name, his father's first name – stared at the Jack of Clubs and ten of Clubs. He deliberately slid the ten of Clubs to the right of the Jack of Clubs and took four $25 chips from one of the stacks of chips and placed them next to the ten of Clubs.

"Split," he announced to Betty Lou.

The crowd gasped. Dad now had four hands on the table. Was this the stupidest man they had ever seen or the cleverest? Betty Lou dealt a ten of Diamonds on top of the Jack of Clubs and a nine of Hearts on top of the ten of Clubs. He now had four pat hands. Maybe he was the cleverest man.

Betty Lou stared at Oakley. Maybe she was daring him to split again. Maybe she didn't care. I'd bet on the latter.

Oakley waved his hand over the cards, indicating he was standing pat with each of his four hands. No more splitting. Betty Lou flipped over her down card or, as gamblers refer to it, the "hole card," to reveal a nine of Hearts, for a total of 13 if you're counting along. She dealt herself a Jack of Spades.

"Dealer busts," she announced, although the applause of the crowd extolling the David-like victory of their hero signaled the redundancy of such words. She took sixteen $25 chips from her faux-gilded tray of chips and placed four next to each of Oakley's winning bets.

"It's customary to tip the dealer for continued good luck from the blackjack gods," she advised.

"See, that's the problem. I'm an atheist," Oakley countered. It was clear already that he and Rosette, assuming they would somehow meet, would never attain a satisfying spiritual connection.

My dad was never really a nerdy math type of guy. He looked like a nerdy math type of guy, but surviving as a young boy in a blue-collar neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago meant you had to be, if not tough, at least a smart-aleck. Oakley was definitely a smart-aleck. At this time he was in his late 20s. He was tall and thin, not athletic or muscled. If he'd been an athlete they would have called him "lanky." That appearance and the ever-present black-rimmed glasses fought a continual battle with his personality, the smart-aleck personality. If he had been born in, say, New York, Brooklyn, the Bronx,

any of those areas, no doubt he would have become one of the world's biggest nerds, just like my college roommate. But he wasn't, and I was proud of him. All of us were, me, my sisters, and my mom.

Raking in his winnings, Oakley barely noticed a casino manager sitting down next to him. His red tie hung loosely at the neck, lying over a white-on-white embroidered shirt, the logo "Harrahs" embroidered onto it. He didn't wear a name tag. The buxom woman accompanying him could have been Rosette's sister.

"That's a nice stack of chips," the manager observed.

Oakley stared at the woman.

"You should know," he said, being, yes, the smart-aleck.

"Splitting tens. Beginner's luck, I guess, huh?"

"Right."

"Tsk, tsk. Don't you know you don't never split tens?"

"Oh, you know, I forgot."

Sticking his face into Oakley's, the manager tilted his head. "I seem to reco'nize your face. You were on t.v. for somethin' or somethin', right?"

"Splitting tens."

I think Oakley should have quit while he was ahead. The manager without a name went to scratch his nose and knocked the pile of chips in front of Oakley to the floor.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Please do allow me."

Oakley bent over to pick up the chips, and the manager dove beneath the chairs with him. He elbowed Oakley in the kidney. You could still hear the clamor of excitement coming from Rosette's craps table over Oakley's restrained groans. As in the wild, never let your predator know your level of distress. It's what Oakley learned in the neighborhood.

Pulling himself up, Oakley found two muscular security guards standing by the table. These were the kind of miscreants who really, really, wanted to be cops, only their cognitive skills didn't allow them to pass the exam. No problem existed with their psychological makeup. Not especially needing the reinforcements, the manager advised, "We don't want your action here, pal."

"Oh, and I thought you were just trying to pick my pocket."

The security guards didn't respond particularly affectionately to this wise crack. They grabbed Oakley by either arm and dragged him away from the table. Oakley struggled to keep his balance.

"Your chips'll be counted and the cash it'll be waiting for you at the cage."

"How thoughtful."

"We don't want you here. You got. .. body odor, right Jimmy?"

"Right," said one of the guards. "You offend my smelling bad."

"Hey, Jimmy, be nice."

He continued offering his brotherly advice to Oakley as they walked to the cashier's cage.

"But, a lot of our patrons, they complain about it. Next time you walk into this establishment, my esteemed associates. .. well, I don' know if I'll be able to control 'em, you know? Somebody might find you sometime lying face down somewhere on a cactus."

Three Months Earlier
CBS Television Studios
New York City

On the right side of the stage of the television show "To Tell The Truth," as seen from the live studio audience, three, well, nerdy-looking men sat. They all wore black-rimmed glasses. They all had greenish, brownish tweed jackets over a white shirt and a black tie. They all looked like college professors. Maybe they all were college professors, but at the beginning of the show I could only be sure that Oakley was one. He was at MIT at the time.

The genial host, beloved by all Americans for his quiet, respectful wit, was Bud Collyer. He always seemed to have a chuckle in his voice, a result no doubt of truly enjoying his job. His desk sat to the left of the professor-contestants and faced that of the four celebrity panelists. I always loved that term, "celebrity panelists." Why not just "celebrities" or "panelists" or, for that matter, "guest stars"? "Celebrity panelists" seemed to be a term embraced by all Americans.

Tom Poston, the comic actor, was one, sitting on the far left end of the panel as viewed by the contestants. Then there were Peggy Cass, the comic actress, Orson Bean, another comic actor, and, at the far right end, the glamorous Kitty Carlisle.

Kitty wore a dress that had a rigid vertical bodice, cantilevered out about six inches from her body. I'm sure her dress designer was also the costume designer for Ming the Merciless, as played by Charles Middleton in the classic Flash Gordon series of Oakley's boyhood. After the question and answer portion of the program was concluded and the panel voted, Oakley would shake hands with Ms. Carlisle first. Vivian, who was to become my mom, was there as well, mingling with the celebrities and Edward Thorp impersonators, her genuineness and always well-coiffured moderate-length blonde hair guaranteeing that she would be noticed among the celebrities.

Bud spoke to the camera.

"That's our distinguished celebrity panel, and now let's meet our special guests." The nerdy men spoke in turn.

"My name is Edward Thorp."

"My name is Edward Thorp."

"My name is Edward Thorp."

It was now time for Bud to provide the background information. Then the celebrity panelists would interrogate the three, trying to determine who was "the real Edward Thorp." At the end of the show, after the panelists voted, Bud would say, "Will the real Edward Thorp please stand up." Often, the guy who two or most of the panelists thought was the real special guest would start to rise from his seat, then sit own, and then the real surprise guest would stand up to audience applause. Sometimes they had two fake risings.

Sometimes, if I remember, the real guest would rise, then sit down, then rise again. It's amazing how you can create so many combinations of risings and sittings among three people. A celebrity of sorts in his own right, the real surprise guest would answer a few questions from the celebrity panel. On this show, Oakley would rise and stay risen. Two of the four panelists would correctly guess he was the real Edward Thorp.

First, Bud had to provide that aforementioned background.

"Edward Thorp is a professor of mathematics. At the age of seven, he was calculating in his head the number of seconds in a year. While at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he developed a technique called 'card counting' that has enabled him to win tens of thousands of dollars playing the game of blackjack in casinos from Las Vegas to Puerto Rico. His book on the subject, *Beat the Dealer*, made *The New York Times* best-seller list. It is currently the most frequently requested volume in the Las Vegas Public Library."

After this public library note, Oakley broke into a wide, obviously genuine grin, a beaming smile he possessed that could illuminate an entire room. It's surprising that not all the panelists would guess, on that evidence alone, that he was the real Edward Thorp.

"Peggy Cass, let's start the questioning with you."

April 16, 1955
Zellerbach Auditorium
UC Berkeley Campus

A forty-foot-long cloth sign, blue on gold, draped over the entrance to Zellerbach Auditorium, read "The Pacific Coast Collegiate Jazz Festival – Welcome to UC Berkeley." Oakley told me he loved playing at the Pacific Coast

Collegiate Jazz Festival, the PCCJF, at Berkeley. Zellerbach Auditorium stands on the west side of Lower Sproul Plaza. You walk down the stairs to the plaza, and it looms in front of you. Mr. Zellerbach must have been a heavy alumni donor.

All the student demonstrations, okay, riots, during the Free Speech Movement of a later decade, would be held up the stairs, to the east, toward the Berkeley hills, on Upper Sproul Plaza, or simply, as it was usually called, Sproul Plaza. Because it faced the administration building, Sproul Plaza, with the legendary Ludwig's Fountain, named after a famous frolicking dog, allowed frenzied students to walk straight to the stairs of the administration building for their sit-ins or love-ins or whatever "in" was on the activist menu that day.

Lower Sproul Plaza, on the other hand, was a football-field-sized area for throwing Frisbees and listening to the loosely structured bongo band on a Sunday afternoon. Oakley told me the interplay of rhythms was both mesmerizing and relaxing. Completely unstructured, without a solo, there were up to a dozen men, each playing a given rhythm over and over. They played, literally, and I don't mean figuratively, I mean literally, for hours. Once, a white guy with no idea of the protocol started playing a solo. Oakley told me the guy got corrected quickly. Nothing is quite like a bunch of guys with foot-high Afros skewering you visually – figuratively, not literally.

At intermissions of concerts, the audience would stream out onto the plaza. No problems with traffic or bus noise would greet them. They'd just look up at the sky and enjoy the stars and the Moon until the house lights would flash, announcing the end of intermission and the beginning of the second part of the concert.

It was about 10:30 p.m. this Saturday night, and the winners of the competitions had been announced. The host band, from UC Berkeley, had invited the UCLA band to perform with them for the final concert. They both sat on the stage. The guest soloist, drummer Ed Shaughnessy from L.A., was playing with the host band from Berkeley.

The music stands in front of the saxophone players from UCLA had "Bruin Big Band" written on them in a fancy script. Maybe it was Peinaud. The music stands in front of the saxophone players from the Berkeley band simply had "UC Jazz" written on them, in block letters. Maybe Helvetica. If you were a high school band member attending the concert you got the unsubtle message that UCLA values football over academics while Berkeley values academics over football. I guess Zellerbach appreciated that.

The auditorium was jammed. Dave LeFebvre was directing the Bruin big band, and Dr. David W. Tucker was directing the UC jazz band. An audience of not only the college musicians performing at the festival but also Berkeley students and Bay Area jazz fans filled the auditorium.

Oakley, at the time 22 years old, stood in front of the bands. He played sensuous trumpet riffs accompanying a woman vocalist. That was Vivian, who as I said was to become my mom. Oakley played a top-of-the-line trumpet, the Vincent Bach Stradivarius. Along with the Benge, it was the finest trumpet of the era. If you, of course, had a lot of money, and were a symphony trumpet player or big-time jazz player, you could get Roland Schilke in Chicago to make one of his hand-made silver Schilke trumpets for you.

The Bach served Oakley well enough. It had a nice dark sound. I remember he complained that the E at the top of the staff was a little flat, so he had to use the alternative first and second valve fingering to stay in tune.

Vivian, in her early 20s, about five feet three inches tall, was slim, and wore an alluring but sophisticated cocktail dress. Vivian possessed the aura of a society gal, one of the 500, invited to the Cotillions, the coming-out parties. She always carried herself with respect. I still don't know exactly why she went for a nerdy mathematician. I guess, no, I'm fairly sure, she loved his intellect. He kept her off-balance with his smart-aleck personality.

I learned in my dating years that after a while a lot of women get tired of being wined and dined by the shallow types. One of my girlfriends, after we moved back to southern California for Oakley's position at UC Irvine, told me why she was attracted to me. Deborah Elwood said to me, "Because you're a good man." Mom, Vivian, must have felt the same way about Oakley.

She sang the tune "I've Never Been in Love Before," accompanied by Oakley playing licks and the joint bands:

I've never been in love before,
Now all at once it's you,
It's you forever more.
I've never been in love before,
I thought my heart was safe,
I thought I knew the score.
But this is wine that's all too strange and strong.
I'm full of foolish song
And out my song must pour.
So please forgive this helpless haze I'm in,
I've never really been in love before."

She stared at Oakley as she sang. Everyone in the hall must have gotten the feeling the look had more content than to ensure they were on the same musical page.

Now it was Oakley's turn. He played eighteen bars, the first two stanzas, and then Vivian came back with the chorus.

But this is wine that's all too strange and strong.
I'm full of foolish song
And out my song must pour.
So please forgive this helpless haze I'm in.
I've really never been in love before.
I've never really been in love before.

When the tune was over, the audience applauded, as much for the music as for the admittedly syrupy sensuality, I'm sure. There were whistles and cheers, too. Oakley and Vivian continued staring at each other. I'd bet more than one person in the audience was thinking, "Get a room!" respectable society girl or not.

Les, the emcee, walked onto the stage, applauding.

"Let's hear it for the Bruin Big Band from UCLA, under the direction of David LeFebvre, and trumpeter Ed Thorp." He pointed to them.

"Yeah! And our own Wednesday Night Band from the University of California, Berkeley, under the direction of Dr. David W. Tucker. Yeah! Featuring Vivian, Vivian Artisen on vocals." Again, he pointed to them. "Let's hear it! Come on!"

Oakley and Vivian held hands, stared at each other, and smiled.

* * *

If you drive east on Ashby Avenue southeast of the UC Berkeley campus, past the Claremont Hotel, you'd enter the tunnel that would take you under the Berkeley hills to the communities of Concord and Walnut Creek. There, summer days often have temperatures in the 90s. Similarly, south of the Burlingame hills you'll find the temperatures in the south Bay, Santa Clara, San Jose, and Palo Alto, to be considerably warmer than in San Francisco. The weather in San Francisco, Oakland, El Cerrito, Richmond, Hayward, Berkeley, and other towns within those hills is dominated by the cool temperatures of the bay. In the morning and evenings you frequently have to wear a light jacket. It was typically chilly this Sunday morning at 8:00 a.m.

The guitar player with the UCLA band sat on somebody's trumpet case next to the bus waiting on Bancroft Avenue behind Eshleman Hall and alternately played riffs from "Joy Spring" and blew on his fingers for warmth. A couple of band members helped the drummer carry his set from Zellerbach to the bus. They loaded it into the belly of the bus and then stood around listening to the guitar player before climbing into the bus for the ride back to a warm Los Angeles.

Oakley walked to the bus carrying his trumpet case. Vivian held his free hand with one hand and carried a bottle with the other.

"Here's some orange juice for the ride. To replenish your energy."

"Excellent! Something to remember you by. Well, it was nice."

"Is that it, then? Just a one-night stand between starving student musicians?"

"I'm not starving." He sipped from the bottle. "Not now, anyway."

"A one-night stand then it is."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," said Oakley, "but Friday night and Saturday night. That makes it a two-night stand."

Vivian unclasped her hand from Oakley's and gestured as she sang a line from "These Foolish Things."

You came, you saw, you conquered me.

Oakley took another sip. "Yes, a libation worthy of Edward the Conqueror. Except, I think you said I'm the greatest trumpet player ever. You conquered me."

"So this is it," said Vivian beginning to be resigned.

"Depends. What do you mean by 'it'?"

"Just like a law student! If you weren't such a good kisser."

The other musicians had long ago climbed into the bus. The driver beeped for Oakley.

"Trained embouchure. Well, g'bye."

"Edward?!"

"I gotta go home now and train my embouchure."

"But!"

"Is seven o'clock okay with you?"

"What?"

"Seven o'clock. I'll drive up in my red T-Bird next Friday. I'll be by about seven o'clock. And just because you're so nice, I'm taking you to Lake Tahoe." My father had to be the smart-aleck.

"Oh, yeah. I mean, yes. Yes. Yes, Edward. Oh, you. .. you. . .."

The bus door closed and Oakley walked to a window seat. He and Vivian waved good-bye. He threw her a kiss.

"Oh, you!" she cried out and kissed him back.

2

A Shayna Madel

"And for God's sake, Julian, if she wants to let you kiss her, then kiss her," his mother advised.

"And if she wants to let you. .."

"Marcel!"

"The boy is twenty-five, Anne."

Most of the European Jews who settled in Chicago in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century lived in small apartments in the Maxwell Street area. After earning a little money they moved west to the Lawndale district, centered on Douglas Boulevard and its wide boulevard park. The elementary school was named Theodore Herzl, after the pioneering Zionist. Immigrants from each little town, or *shtetl*, in Eastern Europe had formed their own orthodox synagogue along Douglas Boulevard. To this day, those synagogues remain, now converted to churches or community centers as the Jewish families have long sincenmoved. Jews with some wealth opted instead for the Hyde Park neighborhood, its focus being the University of Chicago. They would always consider themselves superior to the west side Jews.

As the Lawndale district changed, the Jewish families there moved further west to the Austin neighborhood. By the 1960s and 1970s those neighborhoods also changed, and the Jews as well as other Europeans moved further west or to the northern Chicago suburbs. The Braun family settled in a modest home on Long Avenue, one block north of Madison Street with its kosher bakeries, grocery stores, and butchers.

Austin at that time was home to a mixture of European descendants. The Jews lived north of Washington Boulevard. The Italians lived south of Washington Boulevard. They would each keep their property immaculate so

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that the other group wouldn't utter disparaging profanities, terms with which we're all familiar. Their children all went to Austin High School together.

Inevitably, fights between the two groups occurred. Although the Jewish kids idolized their professional wrestler, Ruffy Silverstein, if some *telener* did them wrong, they would go to the Jewish enforcer, Larry Rosenberg, a tough kid who was with them at Austin High. Julian Braun had never mixed with the tough kids. He had been and remained a young man of the books.

The living room of the Braun family home was modestly decorated with a sofa, love seat, lamp tables, and shelves of books. Jewish homes are depositories of books. The complete *Encyclopedia Judaica* sat on the top shelf. The small dining room connected to the living room. It had a breakfront and a solid oak dining room table surrounded with chairs upholstered in red cloth. Unless company was invited, the dining room table would always be covered with 1/4″ leather-covered cardboard padding, to protect the wood. Tonight the padding had been removed and the *Shabbos* table cloth, of white vinyl with drawings in gold of fruit and flowers, was placed on the table. For Sabbath dinner that night, the table was set with silverware and dishes, a vase of flowers, Sabbath candles, and a loaf of challah bread on a silver tray partially covered with a white cloth.

Julian Braun wore glasses. He sat on the living room sofa being lectured by his parents.

"I've got work to do. How long are the Redmans gonna stay?"

"*Bench licht*, dinner, chatting, *ver vese*, who knows? I made a huge pot of *chunt*, like Bobe used to make. And everything from soup to nuts," answered his mother.

"Maybe you'll like her, Julian," his father offered.

"The women at Hadassah all say she's a lovely girl, a *shayna madel*, with a pretty face, a *shayna punum*."

"Lovely girl," Julian's father concluded.

"Lovely girl," repeated Julian, unenthusiastically.

"And she's got a nice job with Metropolitan Life," encouraged his mother.

"Oh, great, she sells insurance."

"Actually, she's an actuary," said Anne.

"Actually, she's an actual actuary," countered Julian.

"She likes math, Julian. You work at IBM. You like math." Anne was trying to find some reason for hope.

"You could be the father of a whole family of math geniuses," his father added.

"*Foon dein moyl ain gots everen*. You know what that means? From your mouth to God's ears. Just give her a chance, Julian."