

It's Friday night. I take the subway down to the nearest game shop, an alcove in an internet café in the basement of a mall. It's the quintessential hole-in-the-wall, where the patrons speak their own English, Mandarin, and gamer-slang pidgin.

My entry fee is 8 Singapore dollars.

The shop owner, David, shouts out the pairings for the first round, and I meet my opponent. We shake hands, shuffle our decks and roll a pair of dice to decide who goes first. *Hearthstone* and *Overwatch* soundbites bounce from the café to the shop. I win the roll by a pip and shoot a smile across the table. "I'll play first."

I pick up my deck and lay seven cards face-down on the play-mat. No more talking. He gives me a nod, and I pick up my hand. I stare him down—high noon at 8pm.

This is the exhilarating game of *Magic: The Gathering*. It's a trading card game, one with decades of history, thousands of cards, and hundreds of pages of rules.

*Magic* gives its players an escape from the mundane, where every game takes them on a journey to planes of goblins and dragons, pirates and ninjas, elves and dinosaurs. I started playing at my 6th grade summer camp, when from atop a sycamore chair I saw a cult of geeks clustered around cards so meticulously ordered on a table.

I had no friends to play with, so I asked my mom.

I refused to play at the game stores with the big kids, so we played together. She didn't like it much. It was complicated, the games were long, the typeface was too small, and yet with all her heart she indulged this passion of mine. Every night, we sat down at the kitchen table and opened the two tattered decks, and every night, she gave me the better one, just in case I'd had a rough day. She always lost. It was an act of love when she played—we both knew it.

But it ended soon enough. Our nightly romps through fantasy became weekly, then monthly, until we moved halfway around the world, and we never played together again. I'm older, now. I'm one of the big kids.

About two years ago, I decided (in joint effort with my mother) to clean out my room.

My cards were still there, tucked away in some drawer. They'd curled from the humidity, but the feeling—it was still there. It was that feeling of my 12th birthday when my parents saved up and bought me the 250-card box from the newest expansion. It was that feeling of going home after crying in the hallways alone to play *Magic* with my mom until my cheeks were dry and even I couldn't read the font, because nothing makes tears burn away like hurling fireballs at storm elementals. It was that feeling of being a kid at the *Magic* World Cup in San Francisco who couldn't see over the stanchions for the life of him, that feeling of the convention center walls rising like some great steel cathedral, that feeling of looking around and for the first time in my life seeing people just like me.

When I play *Magic*, the rest of the world sits down and waits.

I fan my seven cards. The game store falls away. The play-mat below is a tablecloth, the posters on the walls are paintings of San Francisco. I'm a little kid, playing a card game I barely understand against a mom who only understands that she loves me. We're sitting at our kitchen table, in our old house, with our bright lights, and no one else around. I look up at her, and see she's looking at the four cards in her hand, smiling. She looks back at me.

*It's your turn, Louis. Your turn.*

Alright. My turn.