Tawli

MARIA ASDOURIAN

Before my grandpa died of Alzheimer's, he was a master strategist at backgammon. We had been playing since I was six. According to my grandmother, the only time he lost a game—to a terribly loud walrus-mustached man—was in the winter of 1970 when he drank too much arak at a friend's house one evening. He was a humble man, and he didn't like to talk about himself. But when we set up the backgammon board, I fished some stories from him. They were mostly stories of triumphs and mishaps. He always seemed to be in a quarrel with someone when he was younger: his neighbors, the butcher across town, his cousin's brother-in-law's uncle. This surprised me because he always seemed like such a quiet and introspective man.

I visited him almost every weekend, eager to fill up on bouregs and namoora and kunafeh and other treats that I could never find in my school cafeteria. We read through old fables like Nasreddin Hodja and played a lot of games, but my favorite was backgammon. Tawli was what he called it in Arabic. I remember spending the day at my grandparents' house a few weeks before Easter. I was rummaging through some boxes and found a drawer full of old trinkets he and my grandma brought with them from Lebanon decades ago. In that drawer were dusty piles of photographs, black and white and yellowed with age, small alabaster figurines and long silver chains worn to a dark rusty maroon color. At the bottom in an old box I seized an ornate and worn-looking backgammon game board, much larger than the one we'd always used for playing. I rushed to the living room where he was leafing through my grandma's recipe book. On Sundays, it was our united task to choose our favorite thing from the book for her to make us. I nearly knocked the book out of his hands waving the game board in front of him, and we quickly set up our checkerboard wicker chairs and coffee table—near the entrance of the kitchen, of course, where the smells of the olive oil and lentils wafted out at us. From our important workstation, I could see my grandma moving around in the kitchen, walking back and forth, mincing fresh garlic, stirring the boiling pot on the stove, chopping onions. The television downstairs was playing one of her favorite soap operas, *El Mehteleh*, with a rowdy mix of Arabic syllables darting their way up the stairs. Although I wasn't able to visit them everyday, their home felt so familiar to me, as if time would stand still in between our sessions and pick

right back up again on Sundays.

The game set was beautiful, but old: mahogany, splintered along the edges of the board, with a pair of crooked dice carved out of ivory inside a grey velvet pouch with an inscription on it. Each side of the game board had twelve long isosceles triangles, alternating beige and auburn colors that had faded in some spots. I knew that old things were usually valuable and fragile, so I had to be delicate when I handled the game pieces. Just imagining chipping or breaking a piece of the game made me almost not want to play, but I couldn't resist. My grandpa set everything up quickly after dusting the game pieces and set his cup of Turkish coffee on the table next to him. He was ready for business, and I was too.

My grandpa let me start. I reached out to pick up the dice, and I dropped them with such force that one rolled off the table onto the floor. Thankfully it didn't chip. Then it was my grandpa's turn. He moved with such careful deliberation, even when just rolling a pair of dice. He was superstitious, and first blew into the dice, making a show of it, juggling them in his hand and taking pains to find just the right angle from which to throw them. They landed perfectly, right in the center of the board. It went on like that. His creased fingers, worn from years of tailoring, quickly moved the checker pieces, then pausing for a moment before hovering over the board, as he changed his mind and moved them elsewhere. I'm not sure why, usually he never second-guessed himself. But I beat my grandpa that day. I thought that's how clever I was, more clever than that walrus-mustached man. I guess my grandpa thought so as well. Maybe that's why he had a mischievous grin on his face the rest of the day and winked to my grandma when I bragged about my victory during dinner.

We still played after he was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment, at least in the beginning. I heard lots of strange new scientific terms being used almost everyday at my house, and no one really explained them much to me. But I knew they were all about my grandpa. Everyone was worried about him. Everyone except him, at least. I asked him what was wrong, and all he told me was not to worry. At the time I believed him. He laughed it off, said it was nothing to make a fuss about, that he was already a bit scatterbrained to begin with so it couldn't get much worse. But it did. Over time, he started forgetting simple things, like which buttons to press when using the microwave, where the sock drawer was, when it was his turn to roll the dice during our games. Once, when he was backing up from his driveway in his grey Volkswagen Rabbit, he forgot to take his foot off the gas pedal and crashed right into the row of maple trees across the street. Luckily, he was fine. The car made it out with only minor damage and no one else was hurt. But after that, he got much worse very quickly. My parents took me to see him less and less, and when I asked about it, they said that grandpa wasn't feeling well and needed some rest. In the beginning I whined about it. After all, my weekends at their house were always

so fun. But after some time, I got used to it and only brought visiting up occasionally. I thought that a game of backgammon might cheer him up. But when I was finally able to visit, their house looked different. It was less colorful, somehow, there was a heaviness in the air, and the electric outlets had all been covered with plastic cases. When I asked my grandpa about it, he sighed and rolled his eyes. "I know, I never thought I'd have to live in a house covered in plastic. What am I, a child? I wasn't planning on sticking a metal rod in any outlet…"

I wasn't sure how to respond, so I slowly slinked away. I'd never seen him so upset before. My grandfather took great pride in his independence, in his ability to forge a new and better life for himself and his family from very humble beginnings, and I think realizing he was losing this made him despondent. I remember he used to apologize, over and over again to my grandmother, every chance he got. One day he broke one of her vases, one with a blue and golden yellow floral pattern. He lost his balance when he was getting up and bumped into the table it was on as he was trying to steady himself. I was downstairs watching *The Wild Thornberries* on television when I heard the crash. I ran to see what happened, but stopped halfway up the staircase when I heard my grandpa yelling and my grandma trying to pacify him. She said she didn't mind, that she never even liked that vase. It had been a gift from her sister-in-law. But he was so upset at himself for being clumsy and careless, he was yelling in Armenian and Arabic and I heard a lot of words that I knew were "bad." I was scared then, and over the next several weeks, I was met only with a disheartened "not this time" when I asked him to play some backgammon with me. I thought I had done something to upset him, but my grandma caught me one day before I left their house and whispered that he didn't want me to see his hands trembling during the game. She told me that he was sick, that his brain wasn't working well and that was affecting his memory and even his muscles. It was getting harder and harder to control. "What?" I asked, "but what's really wrong with him?" She looked at me and shook her head. "I wish I knew… they call it Alzheimer's. He's losing his memory, but his trembling may be because of another disease, Parkinson's. Whatever it is, they can't fix it." I couldn't believe that something like this was happening to him. People got sick. I knew that. But losing your memory, slowly forgetting your past and the experiences that give your life its substance… I couldn't imagine anything worse. Would he forget about the walrus-mustached man? Would he forget my grandma? Would he forget me?

His condition progressed very quickly. By the time I was twelve, my grandpa had been diagnosed with late-stage dementia and looked lost and wandering in his own world. On good days he would hum to himself during the day, otherwise he remained silent. But my grandma tried to maintain as much normalcy as she could in their home. She still cooked, always my grandpa's favorite meals, and would sit with him for an hour or two just to get him to finish a quarter of his plate. A home health nurse visited him on a daily basis, but I only got to see him once every week or

two. Most of his time was spent flipping through an old deck of cards or shuffling around the room. He became very agitated if he sat down for too long. My grandma laughed when he made a fuss; she said that it was very typical of him, that he had always been stubborn and even that didn't change. No matter where he was in his mind, his face would always light up for a quick second when he heard her laugh. It was easily missed, if you weren't looking hard enough.

One day during my visiting time, there wasn't anything good on television and nothing much else to do. My grandma was in the kitchen at the time, preparing Turkish coffee on the stovetop for my grandpa. It gave the room a pleasant aroma, a quiet reminder of a once bustling home. I was tip-toeing up and down the stairs, pretending the floor was lava and jumping from chair to couch to table. But I was bored and tired, and my mom wasn't going to be back to pick me up until the evening. I wandered into the kitchen to look for some snacks. There wasn't anything good in the refrigerator, so I scoured through the pantry, but all there was to eat was an expired box of Nabisco crackers and some jellybeans. I filled a Tupperware bowl to the brim with jellybeans and went back to the living room where my grandpa was sitting, trying to balance the beans in one hand and a glass of milk in the other without spilling anything. I asked him if he wanted to watch anything on the television, but he didn't respond, so I settled on the Disney Channel. I wasn't sure if he was in the mood for jellybeans himself, but I grabbed a small handful from the bowl and placed them in front of him, remembering how much he used to love the sour green flavor. But he didn't eat them. Instead he began shuffling them around on his plate.

I pointed at one of the piles on the table, and slowly started lining them up in a pattern. I started pushing them into little piles, then messing them up and starting over again. My grandpa was looking at the table, a puzzled look on his face. I asked him if he would like to try. He grabbed a jellybean—slowly, hesitantly—like he was frightened that it would suddenly jump up, and would place it, first, where I pointed. His hand was trembling as he did so. After a while, I stopped pointing, and he continued the same rhythmic pattern of movements. Pick up red, place next to green, pick up blue, place next to red. Then I asked him to count them, one by one, and he did that, too. It was difficult to hear him, as his voice was barely audible, a whisper. And he sometimes stopped counting and just shuffled the beans around. I was getting tired, but I wanted to keep playing with him. After a while I decided to start cleaning up and put everything away. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him grab a small handful of the green jellybeans he had just sorted and throw them into his mouth. And there it was, that mischievous grin I thought I would never see again.

Maybe I thought then that he would make a miraculous recovery, that he would defy the odds and start remembering again. I knew my grandpa was still there. But he didn't. After he was taken to the nursing home, he only got worse. We kept hearing from

the doctors that this was to be expected, that he didn't have a lot of time left, so all we could hope for was to make him as comfortable as possible for the inevitable. I remember visiting him one day with my mom and dad. My grandma was there as well. He grinned at us blankly as we walked inside, but he remained silent for the remainder of the day. I didn't know where to sit, so I stood to the side and tried to half-crouch on the windowsill. The room was rather large, cloaked with varying shades of beige and grey, with a picture of a large red tulip on the wall. We were there for several hours, and I had been excited to get to meet the doctors. But during the day no one came in, except for one young nurse who handed him a cup filled with pills and a glass of water. My grandma cleared her throat every few minutes between her attempts at conversation. I kept glancing at my grandpa. I wanted to ask him something, but didn't know what. Whenever I opened my mouth, I just couldn't. He wasn't there with us in the room. He was someplace else.

We still visited him once or twice a week. When I got out of the car and walked towards the building, I always hoped that things would be different that day, but it never was. It was the same, spending a few hours staring at that blotch of red on the wall, glancing at the clock, waiting for something to happen. What changed were the smells of the facility, strange and unwelcoming ones that would permeate out of the automatic front door as we stepped inside. There were two televisions in the common area near the front of the building, but my grandpa became agitated when the nurses tried to take him out of his room, so he never got to watch them. He just sat in his uncomfortable looking chair, and when we visited him we had to sit there as well, unable to talk to him or to each other because there wasn't anything left to say. It never sat right with me that one area of his mind could be fine. While his prognosis was still so hopeless, he could still count out jelly beans—admittedly small, but still a form of mathematical reasoning. The diagnosis itself was more like a premature death sentence. I just felt sad and frustrated that he was written off while still here. I wished they could do something to help him. If someone broke a bone, doctors could put a cast on it to make it better and then help them with other sorts of physical therapy. Wasn't there some kind of brain therapy that could do the same for him?

It was December, a few weeks before my birthday. We had just gotten back from Roche Bros., where I had picked up a few coloring sheets that were part of those store-wide contests that promised the winner and their family an all-expense paid vacation to Disneyland. In the car I had been so excited, dreaming up these different coloring palettes I would use to impress the judges. It was like one of those coloring book pages. There was already an outline of a holiday scene with reindeer and snowmen and a jolly-looking Santa, and I just had to be meticulous and color within the lines. I had no doubt in my mind that I would win. I'd set up a little station for myself on the floor, organized all my crayons, colored pencils, and markers into neat and orderly rows. Things felt so monumental back

then, being able to totally immerse yourself into what you were doing, imagining yourself as whatever you wanted to be. Monumentally good, and bad. I heard the phone ring from the other room, a message from the nursing facility. My dad picked up the phone, and I could tell from the look on his face that it was the news he'd been dreading the most. I didn't think it would happen so abruptly. I thought that we would be with him on his last day, sitting around his bed, that I would be holding his hand and in his last breath, he would tell us that he still remembers. But it had been more than a week since I last saw him. Suddenly, I didn't feel like coloring the picture anymore.

I wish I'd played more backgammon with him. I wish I'd known him better. I wish I didn't feel so relieved when I heard the news.