

Chess

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You probably didn't know what I was thinking when I was on my way to see you for the last time. I was remembering heading to your house after school had ended. Grandma would greet me while preparing dinner, and you would be watching television in your room while studying card games. When you saw me walk in, you would not hesitate to put all the cards aside and ask me what I wanted to do. I would bring out Korean chess from the shelf and ask you to teach me. You would always laugh and hum as we played. You never pretended to lose for my benefit, but instead challenged me to beat you. You would take away piece after piece, telling me to remember all the different ways they could move. It took me more than several games, but I eventually remembered.

When my family and I were at the airport heading to the States for the first time, you were there, sending us off. I was terrified of leaving and I cried. At that moment, you held my hands and told me there was nothing to cry about. I saw in your eyes how heartbroken you were, but you were able to hold your tears back. I don't remember if I stopped crying, but I could never forget your kind words.

Four years after we immigrated, you came to visit us in our new home. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed playing Korean chess, but you remembered. You brought the pieces with you and started teaching me again. I was older, and I was able to understand faster. You weren't the only one taking away pieces anymore and I would imitate your hums and laughs as I took yours. I could never beat you though. Maybe you were letting the games get close, but that was as far as I could go. Every day, I would come home from

school, looking forward to playing with you again. Every day, I would hope that the next game will be my first win. But when you had to return home to Korea a month later, I still hadn't had that first win. You promised me that the next time I saw you, we would play again and I promised you that next time, I would win. After you left, I practiced with my dad, brother, and cousin and I tried to remember how your pieces moved. I won against everyone else and I was looking forward to our next match.

I found out that you were diagnosed with lung cancer and it felt like all the air left my own. I didn't know what to say. When I called you, you sounded hoarse but energetic, so I thought I had time. I thought I could worry about seeing you after I finished my college applications, after my fall semester of senior year. I didn't think your health would deteriorate so quickly. When I finished everything and was on the plane to Korea, you had less than weeks to live. I remembered our promise to play Korean chess on our next reunion and how I had been so confident that I would win. That's what I was thinking of when I was on my way to see you.



The first time I walked into the hospital to visit you, I felt very strange. I could not imagine you hospitalized. You used to always walk around the park near your house. You even used to take me along on your walks—even if I declined—telling me that I needed to stay active and be fit and healthy. I finally got to the room you were in. Your name

and five others were on the door. As I walked in, I looked around carefully to find you, but couldn't see you at first. Then I recognized Grandma and turned my head to the patient closest to her. Even then, it took me a moment to realize that it was you. I didn't think you would look so fragile and beaten. I didn't know how to respond to you, except to reassure you that I was there. I couldn't make sense of what you were saying without your dentures, but you didn't talk for long anyways. You held your chest tightly and started moaning in pain. My aunt took me out from the room and started explaining your condition to me. She told me how lung cancer is one of the most painful cancers, and that you also had difficulty breathing. The doctors were giving you a lot of narcotic medications to relieve your pain, but the side effect was that you weren't able to think straight.

I could not quite grasp the seriousness of this side effect at first. I didn't want to believe the cancer or the medications could take you away from me. You recognized me. You remembered me. You couldn't pronounce my name but I knew you were trying to mouth it. However, when I went to see you the next day, something was different. Grandma was translating what you were saying and you were looking for my mom. Not from the States, but from Korea. You couldn't remember that we had immigrated. Day after day, the drugs continued to take away pieces of your memory, pieces of us. My aunt would ask you what you knew, and you remembered me as a baby, where I used to live, when I was born. When your daughter asked you again, you couldn't remember me anymore.

Still, you were so strong. Your oldest daughter asked you which one of the four daughters is your favorite, just to have a laugh, and you answered with, "I love them all equally." I want you to know that I admired you much more because of the answer. Your wife told me that you favored your youngest daughter when they were young, but you didn't want to hurt others' feelings. That's why you had to say that you love them equally. You still had the strength to care for others despite all the pain you were going through.

A day after you were admitted to the hospice, the rest of your daughters arrived from the States. Your second oldest daughter, my mom, held your

hand tightly and told you that she was there now. Afterwards, she had to step out, and I followed. She was thinking about all the things she couldn't do to take care of you because she had chosen to immigrate. I have never seen her cry that much. However, I knew what to do. I quietly held her hands and told her that everything would be okay. I could feel that my eyes were becoming red, but I was able to hold back my tears.

I flew back to the States a day after, and the suspense during the flight was unbearable. Thirteen hours. Anything could have happened in those hours. The memory of me being unsettled during the entire flight is still vivid. Thankfully, nothing happened then and I was able to sleep after I arrived home. What I didn't consider was, anything could have happened while I was asleep. My dad came into my room to wake me up, and he softly told me that you had passed away a few hours ago. Upon hearing the news, I just sat on my bed. Surprisingly, I was calm. Few hours later, I picked up my phone and called my brother who just arrived at the hospice. He too missed your last moment by a few hours.

He told me all the things he regretted doing in front of you. He wished he could have spoken with you, one last time, and show you how much he has matured since the last time you've seen him. He wanted to apologize to you before you left.

We all imagined our final moments with you, but didn't quite get them our way. Your death came as a surprise to us all, and we didn't know how to react. Was there a right move we could have taken? Whenever I play chess, I think of that last game that we never got to play. It wouldn't have mattered to me who won or lost. What I miss and remember are the games we played together and the conversations we had, not the outcome. I think that no matter what move we took to prepare, we would still have this unsettled feeling; the game can't move on without the other player, without you.