

Behind Closed Doors

SHORT STORY

Alan Yan, Grade 12, Whippany Park High School, Whippany, NJ. Christina Wolf, *Educator*; Montclair Art Museum, *Affiliate*. Gold Key, **New Jersey New York Life Award**

Turns out, a man can die twice.

Today was my birthday, April 22nd, 2020. Yet, every cell inside me mourned. A part of me had died today, time's harsh way of reminding me that all good things come to an end.

I couldn't even attend the funeral.

Curled up in my bed, my blankets futilely attempted to warm me up, and I cursed the pandemic yet again. I desperately recalled my cherished final moments with him.

"Red strawberry!" I had beseeched to despondent eyes (but he ignored it. That wasn't allowed—he set the rules. What good are rules if you don't follow them?), before I was barred from visiting ever again. "Too risky" they had said, unknowingly repeating a sentiment I had felt.

But it shouldn't apply to me. I was always the most careful. A fresh change of clothes, a shower, and near obsessive social distancing—a bundle neatly tied together with proper PPE.

It didn't matter in the end, you thought bitterly. Half of the building had been compromised, and he was not spared. The news had hung over the dinner table like Harry Potter's dark mark, foreboding and impossible to ignore.

It wasn't fair.

When he needed support the most, I couldn't provide it. My insides rumbled and roiled with regret, emotions in discord as I had to watch him waste away in isolation, locked in a cold and unloving room. Exhaustion and devastation ate away at my body and my eyelids drooped in response. Darkness drowned me, but I could only wonder how much worse it was for him.

"Name?"

A croaking noise, barely decipherable as intelligent. The sounds tangled at the tip of my

tongue, as if my body still didn't understand that he resides here now, despite what facts lay in front of me.

A confused pause, and meticulously maintained eyebrows furrowed in search of the correlating name. "Room 209."

The clinical tone of the receptionist, weary and overwhelmed due to the recent influx of traffic relating to the epidemic, rankled my nerves. My loving, sweet, and caring grandpa didn't deserve to live here. No, the juxtaposition between the smell of freshly baked pies permeating the warm homely air and the absentmindedly scattered martial arts equipment littering the floors of the living room was too great compared to the dark connotations of freshly cleaned IV drips and the studiously stoic nurses, whisking away documents under the label *September 2019*.

But the world can do with more positivity, I tell myself. I thanked the young girl, words slightly jumbled through my colorful cloth mask. I adjusted the pack resting on my shoulder gingerly and made my way towards the stairs. My legs complained as I strode past the elevator, but I shoved down my emotions with practiced ease. I can't risk it—I hold precious cargo.

Grimacing as I approached the steel handle, I pulled out a disposable latex glove placed in my pocket for this exact purpose. I stepped through the frame and angled my body so my bulky package remained unjostled.

I felt a stare beaming at me from across the room, my head swiveled around to meet the eyes of its owner. I was greeted with the brightest smile in the world—an expression happily mirrored beneath my mask. I settled myself on a foldable chair and disposed of the contaminated latex glove in the same motion. Deliberately laying the package across my lap tauntingly, I derived amusement from my

grandpa's inquisitive stare. Purposely obtuse, I opened with our routine greeting—an exchange we'd traded a thousand times before.

"How do I open the door?"

Laughter easily escaped from his already upwardly curved lips.

"Use the color green!"

It was the little things that filled my heart with an indescribable warmth. Silly as it may be, Grandpa and I developed a system of key phrases when I was four. Unable to swiftly discern family from the masses (or in general), I held an impressive track record of randomly hugging strangers from behind, fully convinced I had assaulted one of my folks with an expression of love. The trend was swiftly ended by my acquisition of glasses, but the embarrassment stuck. Mini-me insisted that the phrases were a necessity; after all, I needed to check that the person I was hugging was truly my grandpa.

However, lord knows how many times I had shouted my phrases into the sky, hopelessly lost in a park. It was only when its matching partner was shouted right back that I had felt safe—despite the lack of visual confirmation—because I knew that my grandpa had come to rescue me.

He finally scoffed.

"Open it already, or curiosity is going to do me in before this disease." He let his chuckles fill up the room again.

I let the stiffness in me drain away with a quick bark of laughter. Of course. Even the hospital couldn't stop the steamroller that is my grandpa. He is as goofy and lovable as ever—and a strong advocate for efficiency, despite the stereotype of the infinitely patient and wise grandpa. I acquiesced, undid the zipper, and brought out the goody, presenting it with flair.

"Grandma baked your favorite. She really misses you."

He hummed in obvious pleasure, eyes lighting up with mirth.

"Tell the woman I love her too alright? She's got more things to worry about than a rickety sack of joints."

I blinked at the brief pressure on my forehead. My grandpa hastily had his offending finger retreat with a smile.

He continued, "You too, you silly grandson. No

need to worry about me. Keep your studies sharp."

Giving an assurance that I was indeed working studiously, I set aside the pie on the counter. Poking my head out of the room, I flagged down a nurse for two plates and a set of forks to match.

"It's been so long that I've forgotten what it tastes like." my grandpa announced, pushing his piece back and forth with his fork with obvious relish. "Smells like home now, doesn't it?"

I nodded in response. But it felt wrong. It just wasn't the same; Grandma only baked strawberry pie on Fridays. The visitor center was only open on the weekends—it felt sacrilegious to enjoy the pie.

Cutting off my negative train of thought, I allowed myself to rise to my grandpa's banter, unwilling to let stray thoughts sour my mood. I was there to enjoy his presence after all. Grandpa reminisced about the time that I tried to eat chocolate powder milk, and I valiantly defended my actions over a decade ago. It wasn't my fault that the dry, brown powder looked so enticing.

Embarrassment prickled at the back of my neck as my grandpa recited my adamant claims that the powder tasted rich and sweet, despite my facial expressions scrunching up and betraying my sentiments.

Slices of pie polished from the paper plates, I set down the remaining half for Grandpa to ration out and enjoy later. The nurses, not to mention my parents, would flay me alive if I let my grandpa over-indulge his passion for the sweet and tangy tarts. As I disposed of the evidence of our consumption, I saw my grandpa fiddling with his hands in an achingly familiar fashion. Hands that once were quick and nimble. He was a radioman in World War 2, fighting for the Chinese, and before that, a silk farmer. I had never known my grandpa to have truly still hands.

Having fished a deck of cards from the depths of my pockets to fulfill the unspoken need, I set up a game of Big Two, or as my grandpa fondly calls it, 大老二 (da lao er). 'We must respect the origins of the game to properly appreciate it,' he would always say.

The reddening hues slipped unnoticed through the windowsill as cards were rapidly exchanged over fond memories.

I ignored my stiffening spine caused by the constant awkward lean over the bed, determined to

enjoy the company. As all good things come to an end, the ebb and flow of conversation were shattered by the intrusion of a goodintentioned nurse. I begrudgingly obliged to the hospital visiting hours. Foot halfway across the boundaries of the room, I twisted my body back around to face my grandpa—the now empty cooler-bag banging clumsily across the wooden door frame. He was staring at me expectantly.

Who was I to let him down? “Is it raining?”

Smiles. “Green bananas.”

My grandpa had come up with this particular phrase. I had once shouted up a storm—one so severe that the park rangers had gotten involved—simply because I didn’t want to leave the swingset. Wary of me tactlessly making a scene, and by extension, dealing with park rangers with hand gestures only (he couldn’t speak a lick of English), he had offered four year-old me a bargain. Asking ‘is it raining’ was an abstract way of asking for permission. ‘Green bananas’ meant ok, while ‘red strawberry’ booked a no negotiation denial. Grandpa promised me that he would always offer the ‘green banana’ route whenever he could, but I had to take the ‘red strawberries’ with no complaint.

In hindsight, I see that I was tricked. Grandpa could simply ask me to leave a dozen minutes earlier than I usually would have, and still make it seem like it was a privilege—securing both timeliness and obedience in one fell swoop—and me none the wiser. Sneaky.

Permission to leave secured, I parted with a promise. “I’ll visit again soon ok?”

I stepped past the reception desk and confidently onto the stairs, heading straight to room 209. Knocking on the door, my gloved hand pushed forward, while the other hand was wrapped protectively around my bulkier-than-usual cooler-bag. My weekly visits had dwindled over the past month due to school, but only a second pie in my bag could appropriately convey my regret.

I had brought a grandma-guaranteed pie every visit, yet without fail, Grandpa would say ‘I’ve forgotten what this tastes like. Perhaps it’s been too long.’ I smirked to myself. I could finally lay the excuse to rest. He’d have to search for a new way to

joke about his senility.

My grandpa, as expected, was sitting up in his hospital bed. His hands finagled over the Optimum remote which matched up to the muted television displaying CCTV. He watched me situate myself, happiness and recognition pasted on his face.

My eyes swept over my grandpa, affirming me of his notably healthy physical condition, and mentally praising the staff in the process. Glad the safety precautions were as tightly upkept as ever, I began the classic exchange. “How do I open the door?”

His mouth opened, but nothing came out. “I-.”

He frowned. “I don’t know.”

A sinking pit tore at my stomach. I had assumed his comments regarding the pies had always been facetious. But something as timeless as the key phrases? No, Grandpa would never joke about that. He had to have misheard me.

I repeated myself cautiously, hoping the sounds could elicit the instinctive response. “How do I open the door?”

I felt my grandpa’s demeanor shift to panic. His left hand flew to the base of his neck—where his dog tags used to reside. He found no comfort.

“I don’t know.” Distress flooded his eyes. “Grandson.. I think I’m forgetting everything.”

The pit in my stomach stopped gnawing...and then *roared*. I grasped his arm, hands shaking.

“Grandpa. No, 老年痴呆, What is my name?”

The vacant and lost look in his eyes tore at my heart.

My own grandpa couldn’t remember my name.

The very one that I would complain to when he cleaned up Legos before I was done playing with them. The one that would take afternoon naps with me, an arm splayed out as a pillow and physical reassurance for mini-me. The one that had been with me since the very beginning.

“I don’t know, grandson. I can’t remember. Why can’t I remember?”

“It’s 忘记了, Grandpa,” I said softly.

He muttered the Chinese characters over and over, clutching them as if they were his lifeline.

“Grandson, I’m scared.”

“Me too.” ■