

Fighting Grandpa's Dementia

Every time I saw my grandparents on my father's side of the family, a "battle royal" was the highlight of the weekend. My sister and I teamed up to fight my dad and Grandpa. Whether the fight occurred in a hotel room, our house or my grandparents' apartment, we always made a mess and had a great time. We used pillows and bed sheets during the fight. Clearly my sister and I were no match for our opponents, but they let us win most of the time. I would occasionally yell out a battle cry while hitting my grandfather as hard as I could with a pillow. Because my grandparents lived in New York, I saw them a few times a year. The fights started when I was about 8 and occurred at least once every time we saw them, even as my sister and I got bigger and stronger.

"Can we have the battle royal now Dad?" I asked

"Sure, dinner isn't for another few hours," he responded

"Grandpa, Eliana, Dad," I called, "IT'S TIME TO FIGHT!!!!"

My grandfather emerged from the kitchen with a confused look on his face.

"What's that?" he asked

"You know Grandpa, a fight, like we always do."

"No, no," he said quietly and confusedly, "No fights, too much of a mess."

"What? Dad we're fighting right? Grandpa is just confused," I whined

My dad pulled me aside and spoke quietly so that no one could hear.

“Daniel, we can’t fight if Grandpa doesn’t want to. His condition is getting worse and worse. You know how he is about tidiness now; he doesn’t want to mess up his room.”

“But dad we can easily fix the room up afterwards,” I replied, “we always fight. Even when Grandma and Grandpa visit us in Washington, D.C. we fight. Last time we had a battle was months ago in the Marriott Hotel. Remember how much fun Grandpa had?”

“I know, I remember. But Grandpa doesn’t understand as well anymore. He doesn’t want to make the room messy. He doesn’t want to fight. He likes neatness and tidiness now. He’s weaker too. You’re 14 and you keep getting bigger. Fighting you and your sister isn’t as easy for us adults as it used to be.”

We looked up in time to see my grandfather wiping down the already spotless dining room table. I gave up. I realized for the first time that Grandpa was really changing. I realized how much his dementia was affecting him. We always fought every time we saw him. He loved the battles just as much as I did. But now that I looked more closely, I could see minute details about his persona that were different from the last time we visited the apartment in New York. He slouched, he moved more slowly. And my dad was right, Grandpa was always cleaning. I stopped trying to convince my dad to let us fight, all the while praying that Grandpa would change back so that we could fight the next time I saw him.

I waited anxiously, holding my breath. My fingers tapped loudly on the dining room table. I was young, excited, and oblivious. I picked up the top card from the deck of red-checkered cards that sat in the middle of the old dining room table.

“YES!!!” I jumped out of the old dinning room chair and did a three second lap around my grandparents’ small apartment. “I just picked up the card I need! I have gin rummy which means I win!” I yelled in excitement.

“Oh boy you got me that game. How about another?” My Grandpa responded, cheerfully, seemingly happy that I was finally able to beat him.

I hadn’t been playing gin rummy very long. Maybe a month or two at the most. So when I beat Grandpa on just my second try, I was ecstatic. I felt as if I had just won the super bowl, even though I was a twelve-year-old kid who’d just won a game of gin rummy. Now I realize that he knew how overjoyed I’d be at winning, and so he let me win. That’s the kind of person Grandpa was; he always wanted those around him to be happy and did everything in his power to make sure we were. He got satisfaction in seeing my huge smile after winning the game as I beamed up at him.

But times change. I sat thinking about that first victory, the scent of mothballs in the small apartment, and my victory lap. I had a while to think, so I took my time. I took in every detail of the small apartment: the dark green rugs, the tiny kitchenette, and the computer on a desk in the corner. I snapped back into the present to see Grandpa staring at me expectantly.

“Did you go Grandpa?” I asked

“What do you mean?” he replied

“Grandpa, you didn’t discard a card from your hand.”

He gazed at me, bewildered. I sighed.

“Never mind. It can just be my turn.”

I nodded to my sister and she looked over Grandpa's shoulder and at all of his cards. She held up two fingers, indicating that what my Grandpa needed to win was a two. I looked down at my hand. Sure enough, I had a two of diamonds. Perfect, I thought. I glanced briefly over the rest of my cards: I had two kings, a ten of hearts, three sevens, and about five or so low cards. I picked up a card from the deck, a five of clubs, and swapped it for the two of diamonds. My grandfather looked down at the two I had just placed on the table, unable to recognize that he had gin if he just picked up the card. He reached for the deck but my sister and I quickly stopped him.

"Grandpa, don't you want this one?" Eliana asked him, pointing to the two of diamonds.

"Yeah Grandpa! That's a good one for sure!" I said

He just shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, "I don't know." Eliana picked up the card and handed it to him. He took it, his whole right arm shaking from the effort of holding up his cards. Dad, Uncle Gerry, Grandma Marian, Mom, Eliana, and I waited for him to discard the useless eight of hearts he had in his hand, thus assuring him of a victory. But he didn't move. I watched him sit in his wheelchair, locked in place against the hard grey colored floors. Nurses and workers walked by the open door that led to a long hallway. Colorful pictures of all the family members with Grandpa hung all over the white walls. These were images that reminded him, and us, of better times at the old apartment in New York. We all stood deathly still, waiting for him. I focused intently on his eyes; small in comparison to the huge circular glasses he wore. He wasn't looking at his card; he was looking across the

table at me. His eyes slowly drooped and his shoulder slumped beneath the red, plaid, button down shirt he always wore.

“Grandpa? Are you awake?” I asked

Everyone remained quiet, looking for some sign that he wasn’t sleeping.

“Dad, wake up! You’re about to win.” My dad said while tapping Grandpa lightly on the arm.

“HUH? What?” he awoke.

“Can you use this two? I think you can!” Eliana said, pointing to the card Grandpa needed to discard from his hand.

“Yoo-hoo,” he pointed his finger at me, “I do it.”

“WOW Grandpa! You beat me again. You’re the greatest!” I exclaimed after he showed his winning hand. He just smiled and reached out and touched my hand. His eyes dropped, his shoulders slumped.

“I think Grandpa wants to sleep,” my dad announced, “I think that’s enough cards for today.”

“OK,” I said tiredly.

I stared with concern at Grandpa. He opened his eyes, as if he could feel my gaze. He managed a small smile, as if to let me know everything was ok. He held up his cards in triumph. The fact that he could even play just a bit of cards was a miracle in itself. He deserved to win.

I couldn’t help but wonder what it was he was smiling about. Was he smiling because he won? Or was it because the game was finally over and he could rest? Was he smiling because he had once let me win and now I was returning the favor? I

know one thing for certain; Grandpa was and would always be the man behind the smile, I need not worry that I would lose him in spirit. Every time afterwards when we played cards, I would let him win. I was scared to win a game and then leave him at the nursing home even for a day. What if the game I won was the last one we ever played if he couldn't play again because of his disease or because he passed on? I couldn't ever win again for fear of it being the last game he ever played. I wanted to make sure he won his last game. He deserved, more than anyone, to go out on top.

“You're the greatest,” I whispered as I looked down at the old, red-checkered deck of cards lying next to Grandpa in the coffin.

He went out on top, dementia couldn't stop him.