

## Checkmate

*Tuesday*

Dani didn't have to check the caller ID when her phone woke her from a dead sleep.

"Dani, one of the encyclopedias is missing." She didn't respond. "Dani?"

They had this conversation at least once a week, but 3:00 a.m. was a new record. Usually, the calls ended by eleven or midnight. Dani imagined her father pacing around the library in his plaid bathrobe, searching for the missing volume. Where was Julia, his overnight nurse?

"I can't do anything about it right now, Dad. But I'll call you first thing in the morning, okay?"  
Silence.

"Okay." Click.

Eleven seconds later, her phone rang again.

"Yes, Dad?"

"I love you."

"Love you too."

Dani knew that he'd have no recollection of the call. She phoned him from her office cubicle the following day to remind him of their dinner date on Friday.

"So, I'll see you Friday?"

"Friday." Click.

Thirty-two seconds later, her phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Love you, Dani."

"I love you too."

*Friday*

Father and daughter sat across from each other at the kitchen counter. Heather, a nursing student, folded laundry in the dining room. Dad called her Julia. He also called his social worker Julia. They had stopped correcting him. Pretty soon, the whole staff would be Julia. It was just easier that way.

“Thanks for eating lunch with your old man,” he said, nudging Dani’s leg playfully with his toe. This was their secret body language, and the body doesn’t forget.

But he wasn’t that old. That was the tragedy. An associate professor, he was barely sixty-one when he began forgetting colleagues’ names, failing to turn up to dissertation defenses, losing his temper with students. He was forced to take early retirement after an unblemished forty-year career. There was no party.

Dani reflected on the cruel irony that a man who used to backpack in Patagonia and scuba dive in the Galapagos could no longer leave his own house without supervision. He required the familiarity of those walls. At least for now, he knew where they began and ended and where all the doors led to. It was the only landscape he understood, the only one he had left.

A year ago, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves of the library were organized by topic and then by author’s last name. Now books lay in piles on the floor, on the armchair, on the mantel over the fireplace. No wonder he kept misplacing his encyclopedias. The only uncluttered surface was the marble coffee table, which displayed an antique chess set.

“Care for a game?” Dani asked. She made it sound like a question, but she was under strict orders from his doctor. Mental stimulation couldn’t reverse his decline, couldn’t stop it, but it could slow it down. They settled into the oversized armchairs with their dark leather upholstery.

Dani moved her pieces around the board as one drives a car to a familiar location, without thinking. He had taught her to play before she was old enough to see over the dining room table. She used to be so frustrated when he won, again and again. Now, *she* was the teacher, reminding him that the rook can’t move diagonally, the pawn can’t move backward. Now, she would have given anything to see him win.

It was white’s turn. He was obliged to move a piece but had run out of options. Any move he made would put him in peril, and he knew it. She could see it in the tightening of his forehead as his eyes darted around the board, considering each doomed scenario. There was no way out.

“*Sheik-māt*,” he whispered in Arabic. “The king is dead.”

“I prefer the Persian *shāh māt*,” Dani countered. “The king is defeated, not dead. You taught me that.”

“I did?” He cocked his head, his brow softening again. “Well, now you’re teaching it to me.”

Dani knew the etymology was grimmer. In modern Persian, *mate* referred to someone without speech, catatonic even. Maybe she preferred the Arabic after all. At least there was a certainty in that. There was finality, an opportunity for closure, for grief. Game over. She swallowed hard.

He tipped the white king onto its side and extended his hand across the table.

“Julia, say goodbye to Dani,” he called. Heather leaned into the doorway and flashed a sympathetic smile.

Dani hugged him long and hard so that their embrace would be imprinted on her brain, so she could remember it even if he couldn't. *Because* he couldn't. Walking to the subway, she wondered if she was fated to end up just another Julia. She counted fifty-one paces before her phone vibrated in her coat pocket.

"Hi, Dad."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

### *Tuesday*

Dani lay staring up at the ceiling for almost an hour before the device on the nightstand started to vibrate.

"Hi, Dad."

"Dani, thank God you picked up. My encyclopedia has gone missing..." his voice trailed off.

"Okay, Dad. But it's late. It's four in the morning. Can I call you tomorrow?"

A pause. "Okay." Click.

Dani glanced at the clock on the wall. One minute and nineteen seconds later, the device in her palm was still. She dialed him back. The ringing ceased, but there was silence on the line.

"Dad?"

"Dani?"

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you too."