



Chinese Checkers

I only ever played Chinese Checkers at my grandparent's house. As soon as Grandma or I murmured the name of the intricate game of marbles and their homes, I would jog into the living room and swiftly slide the giant, wooden, regulation-size board from beneath the yellow, flowered sofa, where it was always kept. It was similar in size to an extra large pizza box, with the sides morphed into a hexagonal shape. I think my grandpa built it for all us grandkids to use, but I was the only one who really ever played.

As I grasped the opposite sides of the board with both hands, my kid-sized arms were nearly hyperextended due to the sheer width of it. Grandma and I always sat the board atop the sofa under which it was stored. I would remove the decorative pillows that provided little to no comfort, but most importantly were a nuisance to our game of checkers, of the Chinese nature. No distractions were allowed. In order to begin the game, we had to acquire our prized battle pieces, which resided under the yellow and pink overstuffed sofa. Housed in a quart-sized Ziploc bag were dozens of marbles of every spherical size.

From milky mauves, to Saturn-like patterns, the orbs either had the alertness of a cat's sultry eyes or the tones of melted sherbet. I don't know how it started, but we always had the same marble choice for our home teams. My choice was the sky-blue ones, with swirls of transparent white, making them look like miniature snow globes, without the snow or log cabin. Each player needed ten marbles. As I searched the transparent sack for ten baby blues, I was always worried that I wouldn't find them all. I would get to nine and think that I had unearthed all that I could, and that the last marble for my team had been dropped and rolled away to who knows where.

Just as I was about to give up and reluctantly gather the assorted red marbles that always made me think of rejected costume beads fallen off a necklace, I would find the sneakiest, smallest blue marble nestled in the corner of the Ziploc. The game would ensue. My memory has become foggy for who would win, but because we were pretty evenly matched, it varied. What didn't vary was our adoration for tea parties.

Coca-Cola was the beverage of choice. I was around the age of seven when the tea parties became a thing of regularity every time I joined my grandparents at their pale blue – almost white – home on 510 Belle Air Place. My grandma and grandpa lived on the same street as I lived. It took about a four-minute walk, a three-minute run, or a two-minute bike ride to get to their driveway. The trip was instantaneous if I was dropped off by my mom or dad.

Upon entering their front door, the first question she always posed was, “do you want anything to eat?” Before I could answer, my grandma would list off what they had to offer “I can fix you up a hamburger, we have some bread, chips...” The list would continue with all the junk food wonders housed only in the cabinets of grandparents. My grandpa would always end the interrogation with the fact that he had some Honey Buns as well. I was offered a Honey Bun probably every time I entered my grandparents' home from about age five to the age I am now, and I probably took him up on the offer fewer than three times. But a tea party was something I couldn't refuse.

The 'set up' of the party was almost the party itself. I would begin with rushing into the laundry room and grabbing Grandma's rolling footstool. It was the color of an artificial banana. Bent over, I'd roll it from the whitish linoleum in the laundry room, to the whitish linoleum in the kitchen, to the scratchy carpet of the family room, to its home right in front of my grandma's knees. The next layer of the table came the Chinese Checker board. I'd get on my hands and

knees, peer under the yellow and pink flowered sofa, and slide the octagonal wooden object out from under. It had a different use this time.

A side-table sized tablecloth embroidered with small purple flowers graced the awkward mushroom of a marble game board and dangerously wheeled step stool. The table was ready to be set. Utensils the size of lobster forks from my mom's old 1970s tea party set, once shiny silver, were now a dull grey. The plates were glossy cream with blue cornflowers scattered throughout. The serving dishes looked like the miniature version of what my grandma used to cook green beans in. We didn't have green beans at our tea parties; we ate ice cream sandwiches. I have no idea how ice cream sandwiches became the choice – and only – delicacy served.

I would open the freezer, where Grandma mostly kept hamburger meat and these magical mugs in various shades of pastel turquoise and yellow that turned soda into slushes when frozen for fifteen minutes. Grandma and I would slowly peel back the logo-laden, plastic-paper skin of our sweet sandwiches, wary to not take off too much chocolate in the process. Once naked, they were placed on one of the cream serving trays. Grandma or I would do the honors of using the half-a-pencil sized knife to slice the dessert into eight relatively equal sections – rather quickly – to ensure the ice cream didn't completely melt into a vanilla soup with soft chocolate croutons. I would grab a can of Coke from the garage refrigerator to stand in as our tea.

The warmth of my fingers penetrated the condensation to allow for the true red of the can to be seen as I precariously poured the beverage into the yellowed teapot that matched all the other plates. I'd fill Grandma's teacup for her first. She had rheumatoid arthritis, especially in her hands, which made it difficult and tiring to do simple tasks. The arthritis had affected her delicate body in a treacherous way, but it hadn't touched her ability to care for others in delicate ways and make them feel valued.

In between sips of our cool Coke and bites of our awkwardly cubed ice cream sandwiches we'd talk about Grandpa's past days of working at Wonder Bread, how he'd bring home white and wheat loaves and those chocolate cupcakes with the white swirl on top each night for her, my mom, and my aunt. We'd talk about the books I had been reading at school, and how I was fascinated with the Great Depression; Grandma was a little girl during the tail end of it, but still remembered wearing dresses made out of flour sacks. We'd talk about my dog Ralph, an overweight and overly kind black lab, who loved my grandpa nearly as much as he loved my family. She'd tell me about her evenings spent twirling with Grandpa on the basketball courts of various gyms, square dancing. Circle skirts the size of breakfast tables and button downs crafted out of plaids and paisleys were Ray and Katherine's habitat on Saturday nights.. The accent of a Texas cowboy with an extensive knowledge of quadrilateral dancing choreography crackled over country music on the record player in the basketball-hoop-flanked room. My mom, five- or six-years-old, would sit complacently with her sister, Carrie, seven years her senior. If allowed – depending on the night – with small steps of great confidence, the duo would walk to the five-and-dime.

There, they'd admire the rows and rows and rows of bon-bons, jawbreakers, jelly beans, and truffles nested in the shelves of their chestnut homes with immense windows. My mom's choice was red licorice ropes each time. If lined end-by-end, they would've made half a double-dutch game possible. The candy was purchased in change, accompanied by my mom's relevé, which she learned from Mrs. Clinton, the dance teacher who taught ballet in her shuttered, green cottage on Grand Avenue in Carthage, Missouri. The relevé was necessary; her nose barely grazed the top of the counter. My mom got her height – or lack thereof – from my grandma.

When standing with her spine as straight one of the yardsticks kept in the Pennsylvania Stoneware crock in the laundry room of my childhood home, Katherine reached just five-foot-one.

My clearest memories of my grandma are from her mid-to-late 70s, when she had the thinnest skin I had ever seen. Tissue paper, or the rice paper cocoon of a spring roll was what kept her insides in. Veins of the deepest blue, parallel and perpendicular, chased each other up and down; starting from her arthritis-enlarged knuckles to the tender crease of her elbow, disappearing into her shirt sleeve. At eight-years-old, I could effortlessly wrap my hand around her wrist, and touch my middle finger to my thumb, with room to fit a thimble against my skin and her skin. Once she remarked that I had broad shoulders, but anyone's shoulders were broad compared to hers which framed her daintily. Her narrow shoulders bore more responsibility and concern for those she loved than it seemed possible.

Grandma loved a lot of things: mustard, pickles, and white onion on hamburgers; watching "Mysteries at the Museum" on the History Channel; cross stitching; her four grandchildren; and her five great-grandchildren (only two of which had the privilege of meeting her even though they were too young to remember). Grandma loved the color olive green. She didn't wear it often, but it was always her answer when I'd ask for her favorite color.

The grandma who would tuck my hair behind my ears because she liked to see as much of my face as she could, was the grandma who would also whisper into those same ears, "Grandma loves you," every time she got the chance. The grandma who had her big, right toe amputated from infection, preventing her from walking on her own, was the same grandma who would attend any and all dance performances I had, even my sixth-grade talent show where I performed a jazz number in an overly-sequined leotard to "The Best is Yet to Come."

Grandma was much like that Chinese checkerboard. She was unique and quirky and created to be the person she was by those who cared about her the most. Just as Grandpa took great and careful and tender care to sand and scrape the grains of the brown oak, her family and friends took great and careful and tender care to ensure that she realized how substantial her heart and soul were. She had different roles for everyone who knew her: grandma, mom, sister, wife, friend, therapist, cheerleader, and personal chef, much like that unorthodox, six-sided, wooden behemoth of a gameboard. Not only was it a checkerboard, but also one of the most integral parts of a tea party, as well as an artist's easel, and sometimes the location of Playdoh sculpting (even though the magenta and turquoise salty paste regularly became stuck in the concave of the marble divots).

The Chinese checkerboard has outlasted generations of grandchildren; slid out from under and back into its home beneath the living room couch too many times to count. It has a legacy that extends beyond the often unfolded Monopoly board, or the purply plastic controller of a GameCube. To those who use the board and to those who knew Grandma, they know that both of these unlikely, related entities will be remembered for years and years to come. These are the memories we have when all the marbles are lost from the Ziploc bag; the memories beyond breath.