

MY GRANDFATHER'S CARDS

You never know what you have until its gone. Emptiness sits within me, uneasy, unrelenting. And nothing feels emptier than the void in my heart, and the harsh reality of the emptiness of the chair across from me. As I sit, interweaving the individuals of the cardboard deck, with a black coffee and a smoke, the countless hours of silence and seriousness come back to fill my ears.

The room fills with smoke as my cigarette sits there, untouched, slowly burning. My coffee slowly empties itself, like an hourglass counting down the days of my existence. The room is still. The only sound is the whisper of the textured cards sliding past each other, as I caress their worn and faded edges, each card showing the evidence of the years, through the seemingly ageing characters of in the deck.

Briscola. An ethnic game of skill. A European duel to greatness. A game for two. And yet, now, I am alone.

There is no other cigarette burning opposite me. There are no grey hairs of experience and wrinkles of knowledge to challenge my game. The dim, dull, soundless and lonely room lacks its defining warmth and brightness that I was so accustomed to when visiting for a game of cards, or only for a simple meal of my grandfather's famous Čevapčići. Life is not what it used to be, now without him, not like those days.

His exuberant happiness was the centre of the house which housed so much of my upbringing. He was never brighter than when holding his hand of three, knowing, telepathically, what cards I held in mine.

We would sit at the old, laminate dining table, which struggled to stand on its own ageing limbs. The table was a stage. The main acts the pistachios, cold meats, cheeses, coffee, ashtrays and cards, that were always placed in exactly the same position every time in preparation for my arrival. The box in which the cards were residents, would sit behind the ornate crystal ashtray, red and fresh, in the beginning. It read 'Trestine Plastificate'. And there it still lies, clear in my memory, as I would repetitively read the name in my head, whilst my grandfather would contemplate his next strategical move. Now, it sits worn, missing the end covers, faded in colour and structure.

I think back to our days fishing, under the neon-blue sky which was threaded with silver, matching the "Stubble of [my grandfather's] cheek and the shaggy whiteness of his hair" whilst the sun toasted our skin and dried the spray of the waves to leave only irregular patterns of salt crystals on our faces. His white singlet, stained by the years of service, and gold ring which reflected the rays of the sun, were uniform to the tradition he had created. He would habitually remind me that one day, the ring would be mine when he was no longer with me. The silence was often broken by the faintness of the "screaming gulls" in the distance, but now silence sits, lingering for an eternity. His cigarette would dissipate into the otherwise crisp air, as the breeze carried away the ashes from the tip. He was never without a cigarette resting his mouth. He would defend his habits, rationalising his choices with a disbelief in the medical industry and their "propaganda". It was wrenching, agonizing, unbelievable, that it was this very belief that led to his admission into the cancer ward. And through his months of war, it was the fight of the disease that was ultimately conquering, and it was through this period that "he felt somehow betrayed by forces he could not control". And yet, his positivity still shone in his contagious smile and burning eyes, even through the darkness of illness.

Held together by tape and elastic bands, the box sits next to me now. The box is now my only companion. We sit alone. We sit silently. There is no stage, no supporting acts. No assorted snacks whose aroma, along with that of the black coffee, would distract from the looming smog of cigarette smoke which sinks from the ceiling, like a cloud filling the sky, as it swirls and collects near the decorative, gold, and floral chandelier. Just me, a deck of tattered playing cards, and a crumbling box.

The chair where my grandfather would sit, sags at the ends of the cushion where he would spend, sat, most of the day. It is almost as if he is still there, his body still sinks down on the blood red velvet of the chair, just that I do not see him. Nor can I feel his presence as I sit at his kitchen table, desolate and teary eyed. Wearing his ring now, cards in hand, I remember my Grandfather and the tactics he taught to me. How to be successful in cards and in life.