

Wings of Wax

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My father is speaking to her in a language whose subtleties my brother and I have forgotten, inducing us to blink and nod affirmatively whenever we sense that we're their topic of conversation. Interrupting my father, my grandmother asks me, "So what are you playing now on the violin?" I perk up as my father falls silent, looking at me with an affirmative yet pained smile. Despite the fact that Savta has terrible hearing, I can't escape the notion that she consciously ignored him. I fidget, tapping out the violin part to *Carmen*. "I'm playing Felix Mendelssohn's *Concerto in E minor*, Savta."

"Ah . . . that's beautiful, I bet you did not know you are descended from the Mendelssohns?"

"I know," I reply, "Savta, I know, Aba told me."

"Aba?" The labyrinth of her brow shifts.

"Aba, Amos, your son, Savta, he's sitting right next to you." My father sits motionless, staring into the table as though somewhere in its linoleum lining he can escape.

"Ah . . . yes, of course," she says, dismissing her mistake without a second thought, as though she doesn't expect my father to dwell on it, which he won't. "I would very much like to hear you play sometime, you know?" This isn't a request so much as a dying wish, a guilt trap of sorts, and I am compelled to comply. I'm afraid of playing for her, but I'm more afraid of regretting *not* having played for her before she passes. Searching desperately for a way to extricate myself from this dichotomy, I say, "I can't, Savta, it's not ready yet." It becomes difficult for me to look at my grandmother's face without getting lost in the patchwork of her sagacious wrinkles.

I think of Theseus, anticipating the inevitable conflict with the Minotaur, as my eyes try to trace her facial maze. I eventually reach the center, my eyes connecting with hers, still brilliant and curious even after 95 years, and find myself hypnotized. In a sudden flurry of images I see the Holocaust, the foundation of Israel, the death of a son during the Six-Day War, the loss of a husband to lung cancer, and the slow attenuation of life in a retirement home.

Through her eyes I see a century of love and loss, suffered for the promise of a better future. I see anger at the insipid turn her life has taken, exacerbated by her lack of say in its course. I blink and the image disappears, revealing a 95-year-old woman, my Savta Leni, being fed packaged gruel by an orderly, what used to be a vegetable dribbling down her chin. My eyes tell me that I see nothing but a frail old woman, visited by grandchildren she loves and a son she cannot. But death has a strange way of forcing one's heart. She remains calm and passive, opposite from her younger self, almost unrecognizable. My father has no idea how to react.

But now it's summer, and I'm running through the streets of Paris with my closest friends. We bolt past boulangeries and cross over cobblestone streets, shirking three centuries of Parisian culture with typical teenage nonchalance. We had planned this trip for months, laying out every detail of every plan to convince our parents that we were responsible enough to stay for a month in Europe, independent. And now here we are, running in eager anticipation of a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert, unabashed by our lack of tickets and the fact that we don't actually know where the stadium is. We revel in the future, its unpredictability, its lack of formulaic cause and effect. We hook arms to cement our bonds, proudly displaying to the world and each other how powerful we are together. We run eagerly forward, laughing and joking, setting aside the ubiquitous reality of college, of separation. I'm linked to my greatest friends, and nothing can break us apart now. But our physical connection is temporary, our laughter will eventually cease, and we will be overcome by the inexorable fact that we must all part ways—forced to separate by the very differences in personality that forged our friendships in the first place.

Fear of separation underlies our devotion to each other, and is a ubiquitous facet of our relationships. I love my brothers and sisters, my comrades-at-arms, and as we draw closer to the end of our Eurotrip, to the reality and the palpability of our separation, I draw them ever closer to myself. I'm trying to prove that their friendship and love create a bond I can never forget, in an attempt to ensure that I never will. But I'm afraid that my love will eventually diminish and that I will grow accustomed to our separation, like the lovers of Lord Byron's "When We Two Parted."

The fear of loss, of parting "in silence and tears" causes Byron's unnamed lovers to isolate themselves from one another, to harden their hearts in order to protect themselves from the prospect of their separation (2). But because they have no faith in each other, Lord Byron's lovers fear the unknown, and

eventually accustom themselves to their separation, leaving the unnamed man to ask his unnamed love why theirs was one “that thy heart could forget” (27).

I feel the unnamed man’s stunned and somber reaction is unwarranted. I feel their eagerness to accept withdrawal as a necessity proves that their love is not pure, not true. It can’t be. I simply can’t trust it to be. I reject the idea of someone favoring acclimation to emotional withdrawal over the naïve romanticism of loyalty and devotion. I prefer to believe that affection and friendship are the mechanisms we use to override fear, uncertainty, anxiety. Maybe I believe in the hopeless romantic precisely because of this unfounded certainty, for in my brief time on this planet, I have learned that we fear the unknown when we are alone to experience it. We fear the future and the uncertainty of the next day when there is no love or friendship for us to fall back upon. In dealing with my grandmother’s imminent death, I fear the perplexity of my own emotions. This, at least, was certain.

My grandmother is dying, has been dying. The doctors claim that she began fading away after developing leukemia, but I believe her evanescence began much earlier. She had been lost in her Cretan labyrinth ever since she made the decision to reject Ariadne’s string, since she made the decision to stop loving. The death of her son, the uncle I never met, in the Six-Day War and the pain she felt at his loss drew her to the conclusion that love is a vulnerability. Like Lord Byron’s star-crossed lovers, she withdrew to her land of walls, twists, and turns, content that she could eventually extricate herself without a guide. After four decades of meandering, she is still marching blindly towards the end. She did not understand that even the greatest Greek heroes prayed for aid from the gods, that even the gods, infallible in their immortality, could love.

My father desired only to be appreciated in the eyes of his austere mother, but she could never respond. In an act of desperation he pretended that he didn’t love her either, essentially treating her as he would a familiar stranger. But we are what we pretend to be, and his was a game of pretense that eventually gained truth. The reality of their relationship makes me believe that she refused his final desperate plea. So he fell upon himself like Ajax from wounded pride, and now believes only in his own mind, his scientific data, and his mathematical calculations. Emotions are vulnerabilities he can no longer afford to indulge in; they are petty and irrational things unexplained by science and mathematics, and thus have no bearing on the walls he has painted over and again with formulas and logical conclusions. But ever since she began dying, ever since he realized that he would never again have the opportunity to love her, he’s been forced into an agony he’s forgotten how to

express. The ensuing deluge of emotional repression will haunt him for the rest of his days, until he too eventually loses himself in the labyrinth of his own mind. If only we could all craft wings of wax to escape from the tyranny of our own self-deprecation, but we are not all so gifted as Daedalus.

My grandmother is dead, and I console myself with the thought that she lived a full, eventful life and that I had been prepared for its eventual conclusion. Her final years were a sweet, somber concerto approaching its final coda, the soloist playing ever softer until all we are left with is the echo of the melody reverberating through the hall. No Savta, the concerto isn't ready yet, and it never will be, because you frighten me with your lack of love, your tragic flaw. For you, the concerto can never be ready; you wouldn't be able to see with your hypnotic eyes the love I put into it. But I know that eventually I *must* play it, and I can't stand that thought. My soul yearns for this situation to end, though my mind rebukes me for this desire.

In Slavic cultures, there is a tradition that wards off the phenomenon of the "jinx." When I don't want my words and desires to come to fruition, I spit three times over my left shoulder to ward off the Devil's nefarious scheming. I always thought this tradition showed a strange lack of faith in the future, as if simple desires or accidental verbalizations could change the course of events that were grounded in much deeper emotional foundations. Did wishing that my grandmother would simply die already make it any more likely that she would? I hoped not. So I confess: I wished she would pass on so that I could finally stop dreading her death and anticipate the life, my life, that would follow it. Tfu, tfu, tfu. But how could I have ever hoped for such a termination of my friends' love?

I wonder why I fear a temporary separation from them, mitigated as it is by instant access and cell-phones, more than my grandmother's permanent passage to death. In an effort to force myself to grieve, I tried to remember the pleasant memories my grandmother and I shared. I could not recall any. My mind was fixated on the idea of her as a distant, aloof old woman with no concrete attachment to the family she created. Conversely, I recalled my friends and our adventures in Europe with the fondest sentiments; I remembered them with only happiness and euphoria. But there is a duality to memory. My locked-arm friendships were not always as joyous as my mind would have me believe, but in the context of the emotional disquietude brought on by my grandmother's impending death, I looked back upon that month in Europe with the happiest nostalgia. Further remembrance revealed tension, awkwardness, and anger, all inexorable facets of my friends and our experiences together. For the sake of my own amelioration and convenience, I had

separated one reality into two distinct stories and then rejected the painful moments for the ideal of friendly devotion. I denied myself the ability to feel pain, for I had wished to believe that friendship and love are painless things, unadulterated by human insecurities and the uncertainty of the future. But these sorrows are facts of life, and my desire to convince myself of my devotion to my friends had almost made me overlook them. The cliché argument says that without sorrow we cannot know joy, but the truth is that without sorrow there is no hope. Why wish for a better future when we are content with what we have?

And now we are running through the Louvre, dodging security guards and ancient mummies alike in our attempt to fit as many masterpieces into our memories as possible. We rush past the Babylonian gallery, barrel past Roman columns, descend stairs to an Ancient Egyptian tomb, only to be stopped in our tracks by the least complete masterpiece on display, *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. She stands shoulders, and shoulders only, above the rest, a decapitated testament to a great battle fought long ago. Here is a stone memory, a corporeal anachronism standing broken and shattered on a pedestal, the figure's hand lying serenely a short distance away from her, as though its separation from her body was simply a fact she had adjusted to. We stand in awe of her majesty, but most of all in awe of the beauty of her incompleteness. Our desire to overfill our minds with pleasant memories, to cement our friendships with happiness and laughter, is complemented by the realization that memories and life don't always need to be pleasant, that pain and sorrow exist. But I know now that our love supersedes them. *Winged Victory* is incomplete, imperfect, yet we view her as a masterpiece of human achievement. My friendships need not be perfect to achieve the same beauty and meaning.

In gazing at this decapitated Nike, I realized that the images we retain of the past are images we use to secure ourselves in certainty. But certainty is a loose term, impossible to truly define when even memories can be altered through sheer subconscious need. And so certainty becomes that which we trust beyond all else, however fickle, ephemeral, or subjective its nature. My father rejected the emotional aspect of his life, his memory, in favor of the facts that gave him comfort. All humans do this, in one way or another. My grandmother isolated herself, rejected her family and the love she could have salvaged when her son, my father's brother, was shot dead. She could not have known that he would die, but after, her memory would not let her forget. She too altered her perception of the past, cursed herself for loving when she should have known it would lead to pain. She came to the conclusion that her

life and her mind were built for the endurance of pain, not love. She was wrong.

We act even though we don't know the consequences and we love even though we don't know where it will lead. I thought once that I would not be able to live without the friends of my past and the memories we've created, but now, I don't know. This frightens me. I fear change, I fear the unknown, and the knowledge that my memory is deluding me only unsettles me further. But I realize now that I don't need to restrain myself in past or present friendships, don't need to fuse myself to the better half of a memory instead of using past experience to guide my present actions. For my grandmother it is too late. For my father it is too late. Tfu, tfu, tfu. For my friends, I cannot say. We have our whole lives ahead of us and each of us is going in a different direction. Whether or not the Fates will have us meet again is an uncertainty I must accept, however combatively. I begin to understand that my anxiety is a false mistrust of their love for me. I may fear the future, cling fervently to my old friendships, but if my friends do the same, are we not in fact rooting ourselves in the certainty of our devotion? Our relationships will never be as ideal as my memories of them, but they don't need to be. Someday the concerto will be ready, and someday I'll play it for everyone to hear, and only those who can understand the love I placed into it will understand me. Whether or not I have already met these understanding friends, or if they lurk somewhere in my future, I cannot know absolutely. But I can trust in those whom I love now, and I have every confidence that they are listening.

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