

# Yellow Arrow Journal



**RENAISSANCE**

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## *Papa's Aftershave* Jordan Nishkian

“Why do you roll like that?” Ian asks over the tavlou board I picked up at a garage sale a few years ago. He rattles two brown dice around in his relaxed hand, palm up. The otar way. I can hear the words from behind the glass of my grandfather’s black-and-white Navy portrait.

It’s a good question. Ian rolls a two and a four, and I can feel Papa Haig cringe as we both watch him move, leaving two pieces unprotected.

“Two and four make a door,” I remind him.

“There’s no point,” he says. “You always win at backgammon anyway.”

“Because you make moves like that.” I pick up the dice and flick them to the other end of the board. Double fives . . . thanks, Papa. A frustrated huff bursts from my opponent while I pretend not to see multiple opportunities to hit his open checkers. Papa would hit an open piece any chance he got—it’s how he taught me to not lose so badly—but to my boyfriend’s benefit, I didn’t inherit his competitive nature. I advance my pieces and avoid the conflict.

There’s a spark of suspicion in Ian’s eyes as he picks up the dice and begins shaking them around. “You’re letting me win.”

“You’re definitely not winning.”

The dice fly across the board again: a one and a three. He lets out another competitive growl and pushes a piece to cover one of his vulnerable ones.

“See, watch how you roll,” he says when it’s my turn. I flick the dice again to the other end of the board. “Like that. Why do you do it like that?”

I remember sitting at the long kitchen table with my grandpa in his Fresno home, his antique tavlou board (the one all his children and grandchildren learned to play on) perched diagonally on one corner. A timelessness hung in the air and melded with California’s

slow, thick summer heat. When he wasn't in his beige La-Z-Boy watching daytime soaps, Papa would be at the table in his end chair. After decades of routine, the vinyl flooring wore away in the places the legs had dragged. My family still hasn't patched them up.

I think about his wide palms and knuckles—he used to be a dentist as a younger man, when his hands could fit inside his patients' mouths. Despite their size, I let him pull plenty of my loose teeth; he was less scary than floss tied around a doorknob. Later, Papa had to wear his gold, zigzag-patterned wedding band on his pinky. It would glint under the ceiling light when he'd brush away flakes of phyllo from warm cheese boregs off his shirt and grab the dice with two large fingers: tuck, curl, release.

"It's how my grandpa rolled," I answer and try to focus on my strategy. It's the one element of the game I never mastered; I still tend to go where the dice take me. Papa Haig, however, liked to plan.

I don't know if I ever beat him at tavlou—his mind was still sharp the last time I saw him. My younger cousin's voice pops in my head: "It's good you said goodbye when you did. He wasn't himself at the end." But that wasn't goodbye. Before I left the house, I told him, "See you next time," and leaned down to kiss his cheek, which was always cold and smelled like aftershave.

Ian rolls a two and a three, stares at the board, then slides a chipped checker five places to a spot where most of his pieces have piled up.

There's a monument in the Republic of Artsakh called Tatik u Papik, Grandma and Grandpa. To Armenians, it means "we are our mountains." Living my whole life by the coast, I was clearly out of touch with my ancestral elements, and the sharp POPS in my ears reminded me of that every time I drove to Fresno through the mountains bordering the San Joaquin Valley.

Ian picks up a fragment of plastic from one of the white pieces and sets it aside, saying that we should get a nicer set. I nod, touching the craggy edge of the fractured checker.

I didn't know about the monument or the saying until Turkey threatened a second genocide with attacks from Azerbaijani soldiers in 2020. I didn't know about the first genocide until an eighth grade field trip to the Museum of Tolerance on Pico Boulevard. It was a week after my dad said they almost named me after great-grandma Araksi, and only an hour after my class trudged through the museum's weighty accounts of the Holocaust. On a small, dark wall after an exhibit of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, there was a black-and-white projection from Red Sunday, 1915. Ottoman soldiers marched masses of Armenians on a dirt road, and lifeless bodies fell into the earth like cobblestones. My ears perked up at the seldom heard name of my ancestry, at the painful past my family kept hidden.

"Your turn." Ian's knee nudges mine.

I learned Papa's brand of aftershave during a Target run a few months after he passed. While my hand hovered over a rose-scented bodywash, loud crashes of plastic sounded behind me. The air heaved with smells of citrus, spice, and wood. *See you next time.* I bolted to the other side of the aisle, and my breath cracked at the glugging, verdant puddle of Brut Splash-On. It teemed with familiarity. A stock boy in a red shirt struggled with the broken bottle and looked up at me. "Sorry 'bout that," he said as he began placing paper towels on top of the spill.

One of my dice skips over the board's barrier and off of our coffee table. With a long arm, Ian retrieves it and places it in my hand. He gives my palm a squeeze, even though he's losing.

At Grandpa's wake, my dad, who was wearing the zigzag ring below his own wedding band, told me that while he was going through Papa's dresser, he found a slip of paper I had written on a few years ago. On it, unsure lines read  $\eta\text{ուր շատից ռուրս եր}$  (You are loved beyond measure). The only other things Papa kept in that drawer were his jewelry, an unwound watch, and a picture of him with his brother, Vahe.

I glance over the board and reach for the other dice: tuck, curl, release. Two sixes.

“Every time,” Ian says, deflated as I remove four of my pieces.

Even when it’s closed, I keep the board where Papa’s portrait can see it. We’re still in the process of saying goodbye: sometimes when I walk past the shaving aisle, sometimes when I roll doubles in tavlou.