The Champion

M.M. De Voe

My father asks me to play Scrabble, just as if he wasn’t dying.

“Ready to lose?” he asks. I don’t answer.

I just open the doors of the game cabinet: doors my father constructed one Sunday afternoon from a piece of plywood, back when our small two-bedroom house in Palo Alto wasn’t surrounded by million dollar mansions. I sat at his feet in the garage on my own little bench, a bench he had made and painted pink for me, his only child. As I lift the battered Scrabble box from its place, my adult hand lingers over the smooth surface of the game cabinet I helped create. It is my left hand; I quickly hide it. No one has yet noticed that my wedding ring is missing. I’m not here to stir up trouble. I’m here to offer my father a kidney.

“Hurry up,” my father says, and I wonder what the big rush is.

Oh.

I put the box on the small square dining room table, cleverly hiding my left hand. He assumes the contorted expression on my face has to do with the new square table.

“We gave up that clunky round thing years ago,” he says, laughing.

“You know you could call.”

“I loved that table.”

If you called more than once a month—

“You know you could call.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted me to.”

My father is dying. I swallow the bitter retort in my head. I pretend a smile.

“Touché,” I say. “Let’s play.”

This was as close to honest as I’d come with my father since I’d begun hiding my broken marriage by breaking all family contact three years ago. My father is a man trained by science to notice errant details. An old-school European. Meaning: if I had called, he would have first noticed my wrecked life, then disapproved of it. I rub my naked and now-sweaty hand across my lap. I have to tell him about my marriage. I have to speak up.

But not yet. The new table puts me at an unfamiliar distance from him; I open the box and pull out two lenteles—we always use the Lithuanian term for the wooden letter stands. Neither one of us knows the English term.

It is remarkable that my father is such a good Scrabble player. He was an immigrant. Is still, I guess. He came from Lithuania with his parents when he was ten. I learned this from my mother; my father never talks about the past. They were escaping the War, Stalin. When he was four years old, he caught scarlet fever and my grandmother carried him in her arms from the DP camp, across the battlefront, to the American base where there was better medicine. As she ran, a bullet grazed my father’s head. It left a scar, a dent the length of a fingernail just above his left eyebrow. I look for it as I hand him his lentele.

When he had brown hair it showed up more. Now that he’s gone gray, the scar fades in with the worry lines on his forehead. I find the pen and scratch paper in the Scrabble box. The last score was 322 to 195. The memory of this, several years old, resurfaces. I’d played badly then, worried he’d discover my marriage was on the rocks. My father snatches the paper from my hand, making me jump.

“My father asks me to play Scrabble, just as if he wasn’t dying. “Ready to lose?” he asks. I don’t answer.

I just open the doors of the game cabinet: doors my father constructed one Sunday afternoon from a piece of plywood, back when our small two-bedroom house in Palo Alto wasn’t surrounded by million dollar mansions. I sat at his feet in the garage on my own little bench, a bench he had made and painted pink for me, his only child. As I lift the battered Scrabble box from its place, my adult hand lingers over the smooth surface of the game cabinet I helped create. It is my left hand; I quickly hide it. No one has yet noticed that my wedding ring is missing. I’m not here to stir up trouble. I’m here to offer my father a kidney.

“Hurry up,” my father says, and I wonder what the big rush is.

Oh.

I put the box on the small square dining room table, cleverly hiding my left hand. He assumes the contorted expression on my face has to do with the new square table.

“We gave up that clunky round thing years ago,” he says, laughing.

“Mom never mentioned it,” I reply. “I loved that table.”

“If you called more than once a month—”

“You know you could call.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted me to.”

My father is dying. I swallow the bitter retort in my head. I pretend a smile.

“Touché,” I say. “Let’s play.”

This was as close to honest as I’d come with my father since I’d begun hiding my broken marriage by breaking all family contact three years ago. My father is a man trained by science to notice errant details. An old-school European. Meaning: if I had called, he would have first noticed my wrecked life, then disapproved of it. I rub my naked and now-sweaty hand across my lap. I have to tell him about my marriage. I have to speak up.

But not yet. The new table puts me at an unfamiliar distance from him; I open the box and pull out two lenteles—we always use the Lithuanian term for the wooden letter stands. Neither one of us knows the English term.

It is remarkable that my father is such a good Scrabble player. He was an immigrant. Is still, I guess. He came from Lithuania with his parents when he was ten. I learned this from my mother; my father never talks about the past. They were escaping the War, Stalin. When he was four years old, he caught scarlet fever and my grandmother carried him in her arms from the DP camp, across the battlefront, to the American base where there was better medicine. As she ran, a bullet grazed my father’s head. It left a scar, a dent the length of a fingernail just above his left eyebrow. I look for it as I hand him his lentele. When he had brown hair it showed up more. Now that he’s gone gray, the scar fades in with the worry lines on his forehead. I find the pen and scratch paper in the Scrabble box. The last score was 322 to 195. The memory of this, several years old, resurfaces. I’d played badly then, worried he’d discover my marriage was on the rocks. My father snatches the paper from my hand, making me jump.

“I see I beat you the last time, too,” he says.

“Luck.”

“I’m ready to beat you again.”

He writes “R” for himself and “G” for me. His name, Ramutis, means “the small, quiet one.” He goes by Ray. Everyone is always stripping us of our heritage. I don’t go by my own name either. Gabija: the Lithuanian fire-goddess. Some villages in Lithuania still burn everlasting flames for her good will in house, hearth, home. I changed my name to Ann, the English equivalent of my middle name, Ona. I corrupted everything my parents wanted for me, starting with my name. I didn’t even go to Stanford, where my dad teaches. I rejected everything. Everything.

But I’m here to fix that. I’m here to give something back, to make amends. However, I can’t bring myself to mention my father’s operation just yet; he is smiling. The “R” column is four times as wide as the “G” column.

“Need a lot of room for your goose-eggs?” I ask, warmly.

“For my high scores,” he says, causing the tiniest sinking feeling in my stomach. His retorts were once more clever. I try to ignore the change, and reach back for the Official Scrabble Player’s Dictionary. I worship dictionaries; they are never wrong.

“I’ll need that to challenge all your made-up words.”


“Kos: an Indian mile.”

“Fa: a long long way to go,” I say. I’d set him up.

“Sol: you think you’re funny?” he says.
“Not mi,” I say. I’m laughing. How can he be dying? His voice is serious, but the lines around his overly-bright blue eyes are starting to crinkle. The scar vanishes.

My father, laughing, looks as thin as I imagine people looked in DP camps. His eyes have retreated deep into his skull. He has never been this thin before. My grandmother, if she were still alive, would have told him, “Eat!” Eating doesn’t help anymore. We share our laughter at the stupid joke, though behind my grin I wonder if this will be the last time.

My mother walks through the room on her way to bed, smothering the laughter with one look. Her raised eyebrows inform me that she knows I haven’t asked him yet.

“Labanaktis,” we say to her. When I was a kid, Lithuanian was the only language allowed in the house. If I spoke in English, my mother or father would say “Ne pliurpk.” My father invented the phrase, a nice way of saying “don’t defecate from your mouth.”

“Sure.” My father always sounds so surprised when I’m nice to him. I sweep his #1 Dad mug off the table. It is part of my picture of my father. Another part of the picture is the black coffee inside the mug: no milk, no sugar. For years, I fixed my parents their coffee at breakfast. Milk for my mother, black for my father. This mug now holds the last droplets of coffee that is pale brown, the color of smoggy sky. While I was away, he began adding cream to settle his perpetual nausea.

“Cookie?” I ask from the kitchen. He shakes his head.

I grab seven or eight for myself and a huge glass of milk, then realize that I should never have asked my father about the cookie. He isn’t allowed to eat the store-bought kind anymore. Too much salt. Another memory surfaces: the last time I visited here, three years ago, I brought a giant-sized bag of the store-bought kind anymore. Too much salt.

Another part of the picture is the black coffee inside the mug: no milk, no sugar. For years, I fixed my parents their coffee at breakfast. Milk for my mother, black for my father. This mug now holds the last droplets of coffee that is pale brown, the color of smoggy sky. While I was away, he began adding cream to settle his perpetual nausea.

“Cookie?” I ask from the kitchen. He shakes his head.

I grab seven or eight for myself and a huge glass of milk, then realize that I should never have asked my father about the cookie. He isn’t allowed to eat the store-bought kind anymore. Too much salt. Another memory surfaces: the last time I visited here, three years ago, I brought a giant-sized bag of the store-bought kind anymore. Too much salt.

My grandmother, if she were still alive, would have told him, “Not mi.” I’m laughing. How can he be dying? His voice is serious, but the lines around his overly-bright blue eyes are starting to crinkle. The scar vanishes.

My father, laughing, looks as thin as I imagine people looked in DP camps. His eyes have retreated deep into his skull. He has never been this thin before. My grandmother, if she were still alive, would have told him, “Eat!” Eating doesn’t help anymore. We share our laughter at the stupid joke, though behind my grin I wonder if this will be the last time.

My mother walks through the room on her way to bed, smothering the laughter with one look. Her raised eyebrows inform me that she knows I haven’t asked him yet.

“Labanaktis,” we say to her. When I was a kid, Lithuanian was the only language allowed in the house. If I spoke in English, my mother or father would say “Ne pliurpk.” My father invented the phrase, a nice way of saying “don’t defecate from your mouth.”

“More coffee?”

“Sure.” My father always sounds so surprised when I’m nice to him. I sweep his #1 Dad mug off the table. It is part of my picture of my father. Another part of the picture is the black coffee inside the mug: no milk, no sugar. For years, I fixed my parents their coffee at breakfast. Milk for my mother, black for my father. This mug now holds the last droplets of coffee that is pale brown, the color of smoggy sky. While I was away, he began adding cream to settle his perpetual nausea.

“Cookie?” I ask from the kitchen. He shakes his head.

I grab seven or eight for myself and a huge glass of milk, then realize that I should never have asked my father about the cookie. He isn’t allowed to eat the store-bought kind anymore. Too much salt. Another memory surfaces: the last time I visited here, three years ago, I brought a giant-sized bag of the store-bought kind anymore. Too much salt.

I watch my father place seven tiles on the lentele. His hands tremble a bit, and I am alarmed. I have read several books on renal failure, and know that my father’s high blood pressure is the main cause of his kidney problems. He refuses to take his medication, according to my mother, preferring to allow nature to rule his life. My mother does what she can with his diet. Because of his useless kidneys, he is in danger of high blood potassium levels, so mushrooms and bananas are no longer a part of my family’s menu. My mother has asked that I not even talk about them. It’s as if those things never existed. When I was little, my father used to call me “glybas,” which means mushroom in Lithuanian. More than the food, I miss the nickname.

“I want to give you one of my kidneys,” I think as I pull seven letters of my own. A-G-R-T-I-D-E. I imagine my father’s response: “No.” He would not bother to explain, that would be the end of it. I am so sure that I shuffle father. I wonder if he should even be drinking coffee. He will lie to me if the answer is no, so I don’t ask. If I could look into his eyes, they would be the same pale shade of blue I remember from three years ago. Kind eyes. Hurt eyes. They would be tired from trying to cover up his new fragility. I choose not to look because I am afraid of exposure. His and mine.

My father is in the process of inverting the Scrabble box. Early on, I was cautioned and instructed on the proper way to put away Scrabble tiles: after the game, you slide the tiles face up into the bottom of the box, then fold the board in half and place it over them. The next time you play, you invert the box, lift it off the top of the board, and slide the tiles right off, face down onto the table. Everything done in the most efficient way possible. That’s what happens when your father is a scientist.

Despite his immigrant status, or perhaps because of it, my father mastered the universal language of mathematics and received a PhD in chemistry. His career gave me an edge in school. When other kids said their fathers were bankers, church officials, or teachers, I got to say that my father was a chemistry researcher. Then I’d pause for effect and enunciate each syllable, inorganic. The words were powerful, as if I’d cast a spell on my classmates.

Our hands now reach for the tiles to mix them. I love the smooth wood under my fingertips. I love the sound of the tiles clicking together like baby teeth. My father’s eyes meet mine: they hold a challenge. They also hold respect, a belief that I am a worthy opponent, that I might win. His watery blue irises look eerily vibrant against the new pallor of his skin. His eyes are slightly discolored at the corners; I have to look away.

“Draw,” I command. I pull an E.

His is R. I go first.

I watch my father place seven tiles on the lentele. His hands tremble a bit, and I am alarmed. I have read several books on renal failure, and know that my father’s high blood pressure is the main cause of his kidney problems. He refuses to take his medication, according to my mother, preferring to allow nature to rule his life. My mother does what she can with his diet. Because of his useless kidneys, he is in danger of high blood potassium levels, so mushrooms and bananas are no longer a part of my family’s menu. My mother has asked that I not even talk about them. It’s as if those things never existed. When I was little, my father used to call me “glybas,” which means mushroom in Lithuanian. More than the food, I miss the nickname.

“I want to give you one of my kidneys,” I think as I pull seven letters of my own. A-G-R-T-I-D-E. I imagine my father’s response: “No.” He would not bother to explain; that would be the end of it. I am so sure that I shuffle
my letters on the lentele without saying a word. My father is shuffling his tiles as well. I picked up the motion from him.

“Tirade, Tiger, Trade, Tear, Eat, Edit, Dear, Diet, Date…” This is a super combination of letters. Perhaps now would be a good time to say something. I have read the statistics: live donors provide a ten percent better graft survival rate than cadavers. I stopped drinking years ago, after a misdemeanor with a Lithuanian boy in the old barn next to his great-grandmother’s cherry orchard. I was a freshman in college, on a school tour of Russia—Lithuania was still part of the Soviet Union at the time—and I had been drinking vodka on the bus. I was all of eighteen at the time, and the tour leader, Comrade Rasa who discovered the two of us, used me as a public example of Lax Capitalist Morality. It was humiliating, and I blamed the drink. My two kidneys are very healthy.

I stop letting my mind wander. “GRADE,” I put in.

“Seven…Fourteen,” I say, smug. I draw: I, E, and I. Too many vowels. Balance is so important. Will I fall behind and spend the rest of the game catching up? Just when I’m getting desperate, I draw the four point V. I’m so happy I forget to draw the last tile.

“My father points his pen at my incomplete lentele.

“What’s wrong with you?” he says. “You’re not my daughter.” I draw another letter.

My father writes my score in deliberately tiny numbers. I listen to the sound of the little wooden squares sliding across his lentele; it reminds me of autumn: rake handles rubbing against each other as they are carried. My father has to find a donor by October.

I can’t bring up the subject now; he’s thinking.

“TOED?”

“Having toes,” my father explains. I accept it, and am forced to accept “GO,” “RE,” and “AD.” My father is already making the game tight.

“Eighteen,” he says. “I’m winning.” It’s the second move.

I shuffle my tiles, smile at the word ‘EVIL,’ consider saving it for ‘DEVIL.’ Finally, I place my tiles on the board one at a time, reciting the words I make from the bottom up.

“LAD, IRE, EGO,” I say, saving the last letter for effect. I place it at the head of the vertical column. “VEIL.” Mine was white. My father lifted it to kiss me on the cheek. It was the only kiss I have ever gotten from him, and I don’t remember how it felt. My husband left me two years ago, and I have not started dating again. I still scratch at the place where the ring used to be. I had been married six years.

My father quickly tallies. “Twenty?”

“Twenty.”

“Don’t get cocky,” he says.

His hair looks much softer than it did when it was brown. My grade school teachers were always surprised when they met him at PTA meetings. “Your father is a handsome man,” they’d tell me, as if chemistry researchers aren’t allowed to be handsome. I’ve searched for that handsomeness, but I’ve never been able to see it. Still can’t see it. He’s six feet tall, thin. His skin is pale and loose on his cheekbones; he looks like he is about to shed it off—underneath will be the smooth pink cheeks I remember stroking after watching him shave. His nose is very straight and long. My mother calls it a Roman nose; she says it’s stately. It’s my nose, really, and I hate my nose. It looks better on my father. His teeth are contorted and yellow, but he still manages a nice smile, especially when it reaches his eyes. A lot of the time, his eyes look dazed, as if he can’t believe where life has landed him. They are sad eyes, I think. The upper lids fold over his lashes. But his posture is good, and my mother always said that good posture could make anyone look attractive.

Later, I am winning with my father close behind. I put ‘JUXTA-’ in front of his ‘POSE’ with the ‘X’ on a double word score. Fifty points.

“Nice,” he says.

I’m so pleased that I can’t respond. In my father’s language, “nice” means “I’m proud to have a daughter as intelligent as you are.” I only get to see this part of my father while playing Scrabble. I tried to have a serious moment with him at my wedding, but all he could do was make knock-knock jokes. He wept as he lifted my veil, but later denied it. The wedding wasn’t in Lithuanian, it wasn’t in a church, it wasn’t even near home; it was in a hotel in New York. My family traveled three thousand miles to attend the wedding, and I saw them for precisely five hours before I left with my American husband and new name for Paris—I had even decided against the Lithuanian honeymoon that my father had offered to fund. All points for which I owe my father explanations, reparations, apologies.

“NINJA,” my father says. His hand is trembling again as he places the tiles, and I am reminded of how he used to castigate me for disturbing tiles already on the board. “Be more careful,” he’d say, uncharacteristically angry. He would calm down only when everything was back in its proper place. His
last turns always take the longest. I go to the kitchen for more cookies and
wonder how it is that I expect to be able to bring up my father's need for a
kidney at the very end of a game I am winning. I refill my milk, wonder why
I'm drinking kid stuff.

I am sitting crosslegged, finishing the last of my midnight snack, when my
father puts in all of his letters.

S-N-O-R-K-L-E.

“Good word,” I say. So typical of him to catch up. So typical of him to
narrow the margin, right when I’m tasting victory. I’ll never win. Never.

Something looks wrong, however. I study the board for a moment.

“Challenge!” I yelp, lunging for the dictionary. I am already looking up
the word, sure I'm right; it's misspelled. My father mutters something under
his breath about children being seen but not heard, gets up and walks towards
his bedroom. He moves slowly, which disturbs me. His slippers shush across
the yellow linoleum.

“Hey!” I half-shout, half-whisper. “Where do you think you’re going?
I'm challenging you.”

“I have to get something,” he says. I ignore him, already mesmerized by
my favorite book. I can't look up a word without getting distracted by the
other words on the page. Smooch. Such a round word. But it makes me think of my ex-husband, of the abuse I suffered at his hands. I bury myself in the other words on the page. Smut can be used as a verb, to
smut! I try to make up a sentence: “The princess smut her face so she could
pass as an urchin.”

Sneezewort: a plant. Snook: to sniff, to pry about. A graduate
student who once used to work for my father was from a small town in Texas
named Snook. I wonder if there's any relation between the word's definition
and the town's name. To pry about. Investigate. Images of my battered face
in the mirror fill my mind; of the bruises under my eyes that I tried so hard
to cover with makeup, only to cry the efforts away. Years of this. How can
I explain this to a man whose life revolves around the microscopic contents
of a beaker? My father returns. He is empty-handed, and I remember why I
have the dictionary open.

“There!” I poke the paperback with a finger. “Snorkel. S-N-O-R-K-L-E.

“Good word,” I say. So typical of him to catch up. So typical of him to
narrow the margin, right when I’m tasting victory. I’ll never win. Never.

Something looks wrong, however. I study the board for a moment.

“Challenge!” I yelp, lunging for the dictionary. I am already looking up
the word, sure I’m right; it’s misspelled. My father mutters something under
his breath about children being seen but not heard, gets up and walks towards
his bedroom. He moves slowly, which disturbs me. His slippers shush across
the yellow linoleum.

“Hey!” I half-shout, half-whisper. “Where do you think you’re going?
I'm challenging you.”

“I have to get something,” he says. I ignore him, already mesmerized by
my favorite book. I can't look up a word without getting distracted by the
other words around it. In fact, I often forget what word I'm trying to look up
in my distraction. My eye is already caught: Smooch. Such a round word. But
it makes me think of my ex-husband, of the abuse I suffered at his hands. I
bury myself in the other words on the page. Smut can be used as a verb, to
smut! I try to make up a sentence: “The princess smut her face so she could
pass as an urchin.”

Sneezewort: a plant. Snook: to sniff, to pry about. A graduate
student who once used to work for my father was from a small town in Texas
named Snook. I wonder if there's any relation between the word's definition
and the town's name. To pry about. Investigate. Images of my battered face
in the mirror fill my mind; of the bruises under my eyes that I tried so hard
to cover with makeup, only to cry the efforts away. Years of this. How can
I explain this to a man whose life revolves around the microscopic contents
of a beaker? My father returns. He is empty-handed, and I remember why I
have the dictionary open.


I read the definition for good measure and wave my hand over the Scrabble
board. My father removes his tiles. It could have been beautiful. NO and E
were already on the board, as was the S; it would have been brilliant if snorkel
were spelled the other way.
The world often wins.

“Off,” I say. “Goose-egg.” I’m not as happy as I had expected to be. My father’s face looks paler than before. I wonder if he left the table to be sick. So much coffee could not have been good for him. I’m ashamed to be winning. My father stands up and walks around his chair.

“What has your mother been telling you?” he says, startling me.

“Not much,” I lie. “Something about your blood?” Now that he’s brought up the subject, I want to avoid it. My father turns towards me and leans on the back of his chair. He looks tired. He stretches his arms over his head. His hands nearly touch the ceiling. I remember having to duck when he rode me around on his shoulders. Now he looks so weak he could not carry a newborn. Yet when he speaks, it is in the tone of voice he uses at the lab. The voice which is too intelligent for me to understand.

“In a nutshell? Round macrocytosis caused by abnormal lipid composition of the erythrocyte membrane. Do not attempt to offer me an organ; I will not accept. Just say goodbye.” His voice is completely devoid of emotion. He could be speaking of a lab rat. I can’t find the words to continue, so I stare at the clock. It is 1:35 in the morning. He sits down. The moment passes.

As he writes the big zero in his column, I place my last vowels. I am stuck with the Q. Stuck, but I’m going to win.

I rub my eyes.

My father manages to find an S and an I one square apart for ‘SKI.’ The move is nice, but pales next to the lost snorkel.

I put the Q in randomly. Better to be challenged than not to try at all. We never pass turns. We never trade in letters. Two points is better than a goose-egg. An unhappy marriage is better than divorce. Pain is preferable to medicine. Dying is easier than accepting help. Sometimes, my father and I actually learn new words in those last desperate moments of the game, but not this time.


He announces my subsequent misses as well and places his final letters. He totals my zeros. He totals his own.

“You have four, I have one,” he says. “You should learn some vocabulary.”

“I won,” I point out. “Final score: 341 to 274. Even after you take off ten for the Q, I beat you by 67 points.”

“You didn’t win.”

“What? I won.” Impaired thought process is another symptom of renal anemia; the one which worries me the most. I try to think of other things.

“You didn’t win. You didn’t win.” His voice is sing-song, like a little kid. He is smiling that big goofy grin. The one that touches his eyes.

“What do you mean? I won.”

“Because I get to redeem my certificate,” he says. I am confused, and I say so.

“The certificate you gave me,” he explains. He pulls it out of his shirt pocket where he must have hidden it while he was in the bedroom: an old piece of pink construction paper roughly the size of a cashier’s check. It has been folded and unfolded several years. Written in periwinkle and magenta and sea-green crayon, in the looped handwriting I outgrew along with those favorite colors, is the following note:

This certificate is good for 100 Scrabble points, redeemable at any time. Happy Father’s Day.

Love, Gabija

The paper is as fragile as an old leaf. My father saved it for almost thirty years.

I pick up the score sheet and the pen. Circle the scores. Add one hundred to my father’s column and nothing to mine. I double-circle the new high score and mark it with an asterisk. I write slowly and press the pen hard to control my tears. We don’t cry.

My father wins. Loser puts away the game. The tiles slide into the box like a rain of marbles. I place the folded board onto the face-up tiles, the score sheet on top of the board, the right way. His way. I put the four lenteles on top of the board and close the box. I swallow and try to find words for what I am thinking. I want my father to know that I love him—that I want to help him, that I want to prolong his life—but the words don’t come.

Instead, I take the fragile certificate and write VOID across the front of it. The pen moves smoothly across the crayon. The ink soaks into the construction paper. My mother is silent as he watches my work, watches the box close on his latest victory.

“Your marriage,” my father comments as he reaches for the light switch. His arm quivers in the air waiting for me to close the game closet door. I rub the empty space on my finger. “Sometimes, you won’t win even when you should. Labanaktis, Gabija. Sweet dreams. Your mother needs you; it’s nice you came to visit. Start calling us again, your voice is more important to me than your internal organs.”

I sit in the darkness. He has beaten me again.