

A Game of Tag

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I heard her before I saw the trees. Glancing back mid-run, I noticed that she had gained ground, so I sped up. My little wandering feet carried me deeper into the woods. She called after me in a teasing voice: "You'd better run, Kid. I'm coming for you!" I weaved through trees and branches with ease. Another glance showed her far behind. But then I looked ahead. A fallen trunk across the path was too close to avoid. I stumbled and fell.

My eyes snapped open, and it took me a moment to remember where I was. The dream slipped away as my gaze swept across the freezing cold room, a room that had felt warmer when she was around. We had spent decades under the same roof growing old together, and somehow she had always made me feel young. But three months ago, I became more aware of my age than ever before. Since then, my body lands the hardest blows, leaving me staggering and uncertain of how many more rounds I've got left.

I tried to shift, hoping my body would let me, but before I could even stir, a voice broke the silence: "I'm gonna get you!" I froze. The words were loud and clear, cheeky, yet innocent. It came from the hallway. I couldn't tell if it was just a sequel of the dream, but I couldn't take the chance. Eager, I tried to pick myself up. The ache was unbearable. I doubted whether I had the strength to stand up altogether. Still, I pushed on. I stretched out my feet and drew the slippers closer, grasping the cane with one hand while the other searched for the headboard. Three times I tried. Three times I failed. Then, a sudden push gave me the boost I needed to lift myself up. I thought of reaching for my robe, but there was no time to waste. I moved toward the hallway as fast as my body would allow. There was no one there. Then, I heard it again —the same voice, now coming from the bathroom.

The sudden brightness stabbed my eyes the moment I flipped the switch. I squinted into the room and looked around. There was no one there. I took a long look at myself in the mirror. "I'm too old to play tag, Sisi." Disappointed, I shifted my weight onto the cane as I turned to leave, but it suddenly slipped on the cold floor and slid out in front of me. I lost my balance and fell backward, landing hard on my back and tailbone. The impact knocked the air from my lungs, and for a moment, I lay there on the frozen floor, too stunned to react. Soon, the pain and cold began to seep deep into my body. I tried to get up, but of course, my limbs refused to obey. My strength was gone; everything felt heavy and numb. Sharp stabs of pain shot through my back and legs. My chest tightened as panic took over me. In a broken voice, I cried out for help, but it was useless. I knew no one would hear me. I was completely alone.

I broke down as hopelessness began to settle in, wondering if this would be my final round. The realization triggered a flood of memories. I thought about my father, whose expectations had always weighed on me, making me feel as if I was never good enough, no matter how hard I tried. Then I remembered my wife's laughter, and I felt again just how lucky I was to have crossed paths with such a remarkable woman. My boy came to mind, and with him, my greatest debt: having failed to be the kind of father I needed when I was young. Then I thought of Russ, who had cared for me so patiently these past months. I imagined him stepping through the door, calling out my name, and finding me like this —lifeless on the bathroom floor. And above all, I thought of my sister, Sisi. After we both became widows, we returned to the house where we grew up. We spent

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decades there, side by side, and I was certain: if one of us were to go, the other would follow. But she went, and didn't wait for me.

I was too lost in my memories to notice the sun rising. When I finally looked up at the bathroom window, a ray of sunshine pierced through, striking the mirror and filling the room with warm light. At that moment, I knew that through it all I had never been alone. And then, as I felt its embrace, I heard the voice whisper softly into my ear, 'Tag...you're it, Kid.'